Chinese Investigative Journalism in the Digital Age: Perspectives from Beijing

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Declaration

This thesis has not been submitted in support of an application for another degree at this or any other university. It is the result of my own work and includes nothing that is the outcome of work done in collaboration except where specifically indicated. Many of the ideas in this thesis were the product of discussion with my supervisors Professor Anne Cronin and Dr Robert (Ted) Gutsche Jr.

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Abstract

As news production worldwide has been experiencing challenges from technological developments, this thesis looks at the gatekeeping practices of Chinese investigative journalists in the digital age. Prior to examining their practices, drawing on interviews with 25 investigative journalists and my field engagement in Beijing, I find that this journalistic group is in an ongoing transition regarding who they are. In this thesis, I first analyze Chinese investigative journalists in terms of their perception of their role, social contributions they make, the quality and circulation of investigative reporting and contrast with daily journalists. Second, I emphasize that the nuanced changes observed from the variances among journalists, in terms of how they think and what they do are at individual and organizational level, driven by an aggregated force from their interactions, struggles, confrontations and negotiations with digital media and the public engagement and consumption of information. Amid this entangled status, I argue the impact from the public use of digital media on investigative journalism is more prominent and complicated than any other political or economic factors during my field exploration, and sufficiently powerful to rival the political controls on news production in China. This can be identified from the selection and processing of raw information into investigative reporting among journalists.

Situated in media sociology studies, this thesis engages with gatekeeping studies to unpack how Chinese investigative journalists approach, process and select raw information and turn it into news in the digital age. I highlight the impact from the public on journalistic practices regarding selecting what to cover based on the

news agenda on digital media, and how they approach sources and choose what to verify in the vast pool of online information. This research takes field experience as the departure of my argumentation and then, I re-engage with gatekeeping studies.

More importantly, this research concentrates on examining the procedures and key concerns proposed by journalists when they deal with raw information in a non-western context. I reach the conclusion that the prevalence of digital media in China increases the tension between the Party-state, journalism and the public. In response, this thesis complicates the understanding of Chinese investigative journalism that journalism in China is also vulnerable to other non-state factors in this age. This thesis suggests that journalism in non-western context should be examined taking the field as the point of departure and then theorized critically.

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Any mistakes which may appear are mine and none of the participants in this research are responsible for the ideas and views expressed in this thesis.

Contents

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List of Abbreviations and Acronyms

Abbreviation	Full name in English	Pinyin (Chinese spelling)
BBS	Bullet Board System	BBS
CAC	Cyberspace Administration of China (also known as OCCAC)	*Wang xin ban (guo jia hu lian wang xin xi ban gong shi)*
CCP	Chinese Communist Party	*Zhong guo gong chan dang*
CCTV	China Central Television	*Zhong guo zhong yang dian shi tai*
CNCTST	China National Committee for Terms in Science and Technology	*Xin wen xue yu chuan bo xue ming ci shen ding wei yuan hui*
CNNIC	China Internet Network Information Center	*Zhong guo hu lian wang wang luo xin xi zhong xin*
CPCPD (CPD)	Publicity Department of the Communist Party of China (also known as Central Propaganda Department)	*Zhong gong zhong yang xuan chuan bu*
GAPP	General Administration of Press and Publication (merged into SAPPRFT in 2013)	*Zhong guo xin wen chu ban shu*
OCCAC	Office of the Central Cyberspace Affairs Commission (also known as CAC)	*Wang luo an quan he xin xi hua wei yuan hui ban gong shi*
SAPPRFT	State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television	*Guo jia guang bo dian ying dian shi zong ju*
SW	Southern Weekly	*Nan fang zhou mo*

Chapter One: Introduction

1.1 Introduction

On 21st July 2018, an article titled "The King of Vaccine (*yi miao zhi wang*)" from a social media (WeChat) user account outraged the parents of thousands of children in China. By exposing that Changchun Changsheng Bio-Technology Co. Ltd manufactured 250,000 ineffective rabies vaccine, which were given to babies in China and that this company was also in charge of faking the records of manufacturing the vaccine, this article drew much attention from the Chinese central authorities, President Xi and Premier Li Keqiang condemned and closed this company in the same month. When the online viewers of "The King of Vaccine" reached 2,000,000 on 22nd July 2018, the article was deleted, but the outrage of the public did not stop. In the following weeks, extensive reporting regarding this vaccine scandal appeared online and the public called for journalistic investigations of the truth of this event. Based on the data given by the *Analytical Report of 2018 Networked Public Opinion* (Zhu et al., 2019), this vaccine scandal ranked the third among 600 news events[1] from November 2017 to November 2018, behind the China-US trade war and "two sessions (*liang hui*)"[2] respectively.

The author of "The King of Vaccine" was Zhang Yuqun, a former investigative journalist of *Southern Weekly*, who specialized in reporting housing and estate issues.

1 News events, public events, internet events and new media events are alternatively used in the Chinese context, referring to the events that trigger massive attention of the public. The intensity of such attention normally can be observed from online media platforms (Wu and Liu, 2018; Jia, 2019).
2 Two sessions, also can be seen as two meetings, referring to annual plenary sessions of the national or local People's Congress and the national or local committee of the Chinese People's Consultative Conference.

SW was once considered one of the most influential newspapers in China for its bold style in reporting controversial political issues. Faced with political and technological impacts, *SW*[3] experienced a great depression after 2004 (Guan, Xia and Cheng, 2017). Currently, Zhang Yuqun works in *Jiemian News*, one of the leading online news media in China. *Jiemian News* was established by *Shanghai Press Group* in 2014 and is characterized by its business news. In China, all the news media groups have to gain licenses from the State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television of the People's Republic of China (SAPPRFT) to make news. Normally, only the traditional media can be licensed. However, as the Central government encourages the traditional media, especially the printed media, to move into digital platforms, a newspaper group can use its licenses to open news websites. *Jiemian News* is one of the successful examples of a newspaper group moving into online media.

Even though Zhang Yuqun worked in an online news organization, he did not publish the article on the news website where he worked for. "The King of Vaccine" was first published and circulated on a public account on WeChat. Established in 2011, WeChat is an application that combines the function of instant messaging and social networking. Up to September 2018, the number of active users on WeChat per month reached 10.82 hundred million (*Statistical Report on WeChat*, 2019). WeChat introduced the micro-video filming in 2018 to compete with other social media

3 Names of political institutions and media organizations firstly appear with their full name. Later mentioning will apply to shortened versions.

platforms. WeChat, as the most popular social media platform in China with 85.5% of usage among netizens (CNNIC, 2017b), has a powerful function for a "one to an unlimited number of strangers" forms of communication called public account (Harwit, 2017: 318).

Zhang Yuqun created a public account on WeChat named "*shou lou chu*"[4], and he authored the article with a pseudonym, "*shou ye*". Reading through Zhang's article, all the materials he used in this article were from three credible and published sources: previous investigative reporting from *National Business Daily*, governmental announcements and the financial report of Changsheng Bio-Technology Company (Zhang, 2018). He assembled the fragmented and discrete information which was acknowledged as "facts" from different types of credible publications and evaluated the value of these materials from the aspect of relevance to the public. As the misconduct of this company was exposed and online discussion reached its peak, this article was soon deleted by Chinese government, for fear of generating public panic and chaos.

However, this did not stop the journalistic investigation, because fulfilling the right to know of the public is one of the key tasks of Chinese investigative journalists (Sæther, 2008; Tong, 2011). While journalists devoted themselves to the further

4 "*Shou lou chu* (兽楼处)" is the name of the public account created by Zhang Yuqun. On the one hand, "*shou lou chu*" means an office of an estate selling company, which refers to the specialized reporting area of Zhang, but Zhang is also interested in political affairs. On the other hand, "*shou* (兽, means beast/animal)", this Chinese character, is used caricaturally with a homophone, rather than "*shou* (售, means selling)". This ironical homophone implies the behavior of some social and political elite as abusing public power. The signature of his public account on WeChat is "I am veteran vet and specialized in exposing big talkers."

investigation of “truth”, this article was subsequently questioned by some public intellectuals and media professionals, because in his article the author did not provide any new evidence from interviewing with the stakeholders. As commented by Rose Luqiu, a famous Chinese television journalist based in Hong Kong, who is the first female journalist to report the 2001 Afghan war and now works in academia (BBC, 2018), “this article cannot count as a piece of investigative reporting, because it did not involve any interviewing materials.” Investigative reporting in China normally includes abundant information obtained from journalists’ in person interview with different sources and journalistic observation (Tong, 2011). In contrast to our traditional understanding on investigative reporting, Zhang Yuqun reorganized and combined the previous news and public information into a new article. The narrative style of this article is plain and easy to understand for the public. Moreover, by referring to the financial report of Changchun Changsheng Company, Zhang Yuqun analyzed how the hidden chains of profit operated behind the scene. He revealed the intertwined relationship among the National Medical Products Administration, vaccine market and the shareholding of vaccine companies in China. Even though there was no first-hand material included in Zhang’s work, the efforts he made in exposing the wrongdoings of this company successfully attracted the attention of the Chinese public.

As the whole Chinese society was condemning the CEO of Changsheng company, the public did not forget the person who exposed this event. Then, the online world was soon occupied by a fever of searching for the background

information of Zhang Yuqun and looking for the "real" investigative journalists in China. Numerous articles and debates online started to discuss who are Chinese investigative journalists. For such a breaking news[5], where are the professional journalists? Why was the reporting circulated on a social media platform instead of a mainstream news outlet? And why were the investigative journalists absent? Most of the debates surrounding these questions occupied the discourse on social media. A commentary circulated on WeChat[6] argued that we are in an age that public's attention is attracted by sensational news and infotainment. This has resulted in the decline of investigative journalists in China. Another article[7] argued that the depression of this journalistic community was attributed to the sabotage of Chinese political authorities. This is because similar cases were exposed by journalists before and the journalists who reported such news were fired or left (Liu, 2018).

Among these public discussions, two camps of opinion formed regarding how to recognize investigative journalists in China, initiated by some online opinion leaders. Here, "opinion leaders" refers to "initiators of a case, agenda setters and disseminators" (Nip and Fu, 2016:129-130)[8]. One is that some media professionals, such as a former journalist, Liu Xiangnan, accused Zhang Yuqun of having

[5] Breaking news (*tu fa shi jian*) in the Chinese context means "unforeseen incidents" (Repnikova, 2017:84) and also refers to the news event having great social significance. As there is no unified explanation on "breaking news" in Chinese journalism, this research adopts the meaning mentioned above.
[6] Changliuzhen (2018). *There are no investigative journalists at all* (*shi shang ben wu diao cha ji zhe*). Available at: https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/wqslBwlKA3qCyWeyCvMDOw (accessed on 24 July 2018)
[7] Maoyankanren (2018). *Where are the investigative journalists in recent years* (*zhe xie nian, diao cha ji zhe qu na er le*). Available at: http://m.kdnet.net/share-12594773.html (accessed on 23 July 2018)
[8] Nip and Fu (2016) use these categories to define the opinion leaders only on Sina Weibo, Chinese twitter.

"plagiarized" previously published reporting and regrouped the old evidence with a new narrative structure. An article[9] implied that the public's advocacy on investigative journalists was like "crocodile's tears". The author suggested that the disappearance of investigative journalists should be blamed on those online news consumers. News consumers are obsessed with soft news and tabloid news, which makes investigative reporting have nowhere to survive.

Another stream of voice online argued that these professional investigative journalists were jealous of the author, Zhang Yuqun. This is because Zhang's article went viral with a storytelling narrative that the professional journalists had failed to produce in their previous reporting. What mattered most to the public was what was exposed. Zhang Yuqun wrote on his social media account that the original intention of writing this article was nothing more than making the public aware of the importance of this issue. In the eyes of the public, it might not be a big matter in what form the news was produced and disseminated, as long as it was for the public good by providing the concealed knowledge and facts.

In this news event, many social actors were involved, such as social media users, investigative journalists, online opinion leaders, the central authorities and the company, which intentionally or unintentionally pushed this news into the spotlight of the public. Published on WeChat, written as a story, highly concerned with the public interest, all of these reasons made this article become one of the most breaking news

[9] Sanbiaolongmenzhen (2018). *Do not pretend to adore investigative journalists* (*bie zai jia Zhuang ai diao cha ji zhe le*). Available at: http://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/lmGx7CEeBaEGAvuu9exxVg (accessed on 24 July 2018).

in China in 2018. This case implies much more than how we can understand the public events and its circulation. Even though journalistic reporting centers on the public interest, what matters more are the strategies and approaches to facilitate the circulation of reporting at this digital moment. As aforementioned, most of the materials and details regarding this vaccine scandal had been published in newspapers previously, but had not triggered such a large-scale public debate. Zhang Yuqun applied a storytelling format, which made readers sympathize and successfully catch their attention. This is a common strategy that as breaking news occurs, some social media users rewrite the news story and integrate their comments into the writing (deLisle, Goldstein and Yang, 2016). As argued by Chen, Mao and Qiu (2018: Chapter 3), social media users have become a mainstream force that "challenge the power dynamic of Chinese society, although with limitations of political control".

Taking together what I introduced above, the production and circulation of investigative reporting in China is unprecedentedly complicated by challenges from digital media, online opinion leaders and the central government (Tong, 2018). Whilst constraints from political sectors are tangible – involving specific regulations and information blocking strategies (Xu, 2015) – constraints from such challenges are more intangible. A veteran journalist in this study remarked (Participant 16) "I am getting more and more confused about what the public wants and cares about today." Therefore, based on this scenario, this research tries to explore the current challenges and constraints that Chinese investigative journalists are faced with in their production of news in the digital age.

1.2 Research questions and arguments

The research questions I propose here are: 1) What are the practices of news production among investigative journalists in Beijing in the digital age? 2) How do the findings of this study contribute to the debates about investigative journalism in China? 3) How do the findings of this study contribute to the relationship between western journalism theories and Chinese journalism studies?

The argument of this thesis has a twofold meaning. Firstly, by looking at the practices of investigative journalists in Beijing in 2017, I argue that this journalistic group experienced unprecedented impacts from digital media, which is a neglected area not explored explicitly in previous research. I develop my discussion of this area through engaging with debates in gatekeeping studies and examine how investigative journalists produce news reporting and what constraints they are faced with in the digital age. In doing so, I identify three major changes in their practices against the digital backdrop: 1) investigative journalists have to be strongly aware of the public desire of news by closely looking at the online public agenda. 2) The organizational constraints on investigative journalists are changed into a conflict between journalists and editors about what genres of news events should be covered. 3) As journalists-sources relationship is challenged by online mis-/dis-information, journalists have to return to the offline methods to seek out facts. I suggest such digital challenges are disrupting the critical nature of Chinese investigative journalists at a micro level, which is overshadowed by the massive interrogations of the Party's coercive controls over the freedom of press among existing literature. This is because digital challenges

are more intangible and fragmented and likely to bond with the personal interests from the public, compared with the Party's regulations.

Secondly, in the journey of reaching this conclusion, I also argue that Chinese investigative journalism studies (as a part of Chinese journalism studies) should be explored with a de-westernized approach. This can be achieved by taking the fieldwork as the departure of research, closely engaging with it and evaluating the variations among individual journalistic practitioners in a micro observation, rather than relying on a theory-grounded approach in qualitative studies (Morse, 2020). This is only mentioned by a few academic evidence (e.g. Qi, 2014) and my observations will justify this through my further analysis. Undoubtedly, investigating the China-characterized phenomena needs to be grounded in what occurred in the field (O'Brien, 2006). Looking at the nuanced changes among individuals' perception of the presence contributes to improving the theoretical-empirical link in non-western studies by enlarging the body of evidence (Waisbord and Mellado, 2014; Cabañes, 2020) and the capacity of theories (Qi, 2014). Therefore, I set out from my field encounters and then identified my concerns and questions. I apply gatekeeping as the springboard of this research and I suggest gatekeeping as a set of practices that investigative journalists approach, select and process information, from which deciphers the "truth" veiled by digital media, in this thesis.

1.3 Research gaps in Chinese media and journalism studies

Drawing from the in-depth interviews with 25 investigative journalists in Beijing in 2017, this thesis examines the practices of these journalists. Aiming to break through

the conventional understanding of Chinese investigative journalism and introduce new knowledge on the studies of Chinese-characterized journalism phenomena, this section begins by discussing how I identified the research gap by looking at the relationship between existing literature and my field exploration.

There is a long tradition of Chinese phenomena being examined under a dichotomy of state and society (Zhao, 1998; Zhao, 2008). Chinese journalism studies is one of the disciplines that is extensively explored under this dichotomy. What has concerned scholars most is the relation between the Party-state and journalists' activities (Tong, 2011; Wang, 2016; Hassid, 2016; Brady, 2008). Indeed, research on Chinese journalism and other media professionals concentrating on examining how the Party intervenes in the news production and information dissemination moving from offline to online makes a great contribution to understanding the journalism practices in a non-western context.

Referring to an official definition from *Terminologies in Journalism and Communication studies* (China National Committee for Terms in Sciences and Technologies, 2018:2), "news media systems (*xin wen ti zhi*)" is defined as "the management, ownership and distribution of the journalism and communication industry." As a key branch of the Chinese political system, the Chinese media system serves the purpose of propaganda (Brady, 2008). Media have been an important tool for the Party in exercising ideological control since the last century. From this perspective, media organizations in China are all in the grip of the Party. This

situation is identified as the most distinctive characteristic of Chinese media and journalism, in contrast to the western.

Based on these arguments above, although I never deny that coercion from the Party does damage the freedom of the press in China, the tight control from political power is *not* the single factor that impairs journalistic construction of reality, especially during the period I examined journalism practices. Comparatively speaking, constraints from the political sectors are not as apparent as previous studies have suggested for two reasons, according to my observations.

First, Chinese investigative journalists have adapted to political controls in the long term. Referring to the words from one of my participants working as an investigative journalist for more than 10 years, political impact on news production has become a part of the objective reality that journalists have to accept (Participant 11). Here, this journalist does not mean that investigative journalists should be tamed, censored and controlled by the Party without any struggle. Instead, journalists have to know that the political elites would hide some facts and journalists are denied access forever. This constraint has integrated into the reality that journalists have to live with. As argued by Meng (2018:15), "the media do not simply reflect or act as the tool of real-life political struggles: they are part of those struggles." Indeed, most academic works seemingly treat media or journalism as a force which can contribute to more freedom for the Chinese public (Repnikova, 2017; Wang, 2016); however, such a western-based logic does not make sense in the Chinese context, at least not at the moment. So, this subtle change from the perceptions of individual journalist

validates the gap I identified from the literature and also signals a necessity to re-examine the nature of investigative journalism in China. As scholars documented how the transitions of Chinese journalism in parallel with the fluctuations of political climate at a macro level, my thesis would like to explore to what extent these macro arguments fit (or not) my micro observations, and what role the digital media plays (such as benefiting, restoring, offsetting or resisting) in the tense relationship between journalism and the Party that we have known so far; and also how such digital transition in journalism is empowered by what social actors in what ways.

Second, my observation shows that journalists' aversion to political control in China has not changed drastically. Aims and means that the propaganda department (CPD) implement to restrict over journalistic practices have not changed essentially. There are mainly two sets of practices applied by the CPD to control journalism: blocking journalists' reporting activities, and censoring news reporting (Xu, 2015; Wang, 2016). The CPD can disturb journalists' activities by issuing bans on their investigation (Zhang, 2009). In these respects, Chinese journalism is still under the guidance of the Party.

While faced with these identified constraints, journalists' investigations of hidden facts are also challenged by different social actors that journalists have to work with. The emergence of these non-state factors is significant for our developing understanding of journalism in China. "People's minds are getting more and more complicated and they know how to use the media to reach their goal.… I really do not think that political control is the biggest problem now," Participant 25 told me. As

aforementioned, digital technologies not only empower the netizens to resist authoritarian control, but also help netizens to achieve their personal interests. I will specifically emphasize this in Chapter Six.

Therefore, the reason why I would examine the practices of investigative journalists in China is built upon the gap between what I found from my fieldwork and what I identified from existing literature. This research challenges the previous knowledge established on the conventional understanding of Chinese investigative journalism that the strict controls by the Party-state have institutionalized journalism as a pro-Party ideological tool for decades. My analysis of interviews will justify why I argue this in detail.

1.4 Research aims

This research intends to analyze the relevant practices of investigative journalists in Beijing regarding how they think, what they do and what they value in the process of news production. Thus, this research starts with examining the basic practices and activities among investigative journalists in Beijing in 2017. By looking at journalistic practices, I map out the important elements, constraints and threats that investigative journalists encountered. Then I categorize such elements into the individual level and the organizational level in order to how they can exert influence over journalistic practices.

Beyond the descriptive level of inquiry, this research aims to figure out how these identified elements challenge Chinese investigative journalists and how the contribution of this research aligns with de-westernizing studies on Chinese

journalism. Despite the findings of western journalism showed that "news is an outcome of work accomplished in a social environment" (Berkowitz, 1997:3), such an argument is rarely examined systematically in the Chinese context. On the one hand, Chinese journalism studies have been *set the tone* by exploring the interplay of market and state since the late 20th century (He, 2000; Lee, 2000; Guan, Xia and Cheng, 2017). Journalism has not been studied as an independent institution in China since it is embedded in the political structure.

On the other hand, when scholars (Pan, 2000; Tong, 2011) adopt a sociological approach to look at the organizational features of Chinese news organizations, it is hard to identify the boundary between the organizational aspect and the institutional aspect of journalism, because all the media in China are owned by the Party. Here, referring to Tong's research (2011), analyzing the production of investigative reporting at the organizational level means looking at how journalistic autonomy is practiced when the interests of individual journalists and organizational routines (payment, self-censorship, recruitment) are conflicted. However, in the earlier work given by Tong and Sparks (2009), they suggested the institutional culture of Chinese investigative journalists consists of journalism professionalism, in which journalistic autonomy is a major element. From such statements, the understandings of institutional feature and organizational feature of Chinese journalism are mixed together.

Moreover, while the Party works as a "socially penetrating organization" to implement its ideological control, the Party's control has been integrated into the

organizational routines, policy and principles (Zhao, 2008:11). So, how do we make a distinction between institutional and organizational factors in a power-centralized environment? Building on previous studies and field observations, we can see there are still many spaces left unexamined, in terms of what social factors can impact on news production. Some Chinese scholars once argued that this might be due to the fact that Chinese media studies has been theoretically simplified with a westernized dichotomy of state and citizen, state and market, authoritarianism and democracy (Yang, 2014; Meng, 2018; Zhao, 2008). In all these aforementioned ways, I engage with the social elements involved in news production and look beyond the conventional understandings of Chinese journalism to decipher the potential threats, struggles and opportunities that journalism is faced with.

1.5 Research significance

The significance of this research is built upon the question about what to study about Chinese journalism and how to study it. As Chinese journalism studies has been examined under the western theoretical framework for a long time, what is investigated in the realm of journalism is dull. Namely, most debates are about how freedom of the press is suppressed. This research attempts to de-westernize the understanding of Chinese investigative journalism which has survived under the coercive power of the Party-state. This attempt is made by taking such political controls as a part of the reality that journalists have to confront and introducing multiple different voices from journalists (my participants) to look at more possibilities in journalism. As noted by Xin (2017:16), the unique social development

of Chinese society calls for "developing new theoretical perspectives to explain its social reality." New theoretical contributions do not come from a vacuum, but from lengthy engagement with the field. In this research, I engaged with the journalists and media professionals first, and then questions about their practices emerged subsequently. That is how I justify the research questions I put forward in this thesis.

Thus, the significance of this research is established on a triangulation of theory, method, and empirical practice. From one aspect, this research does not situate Chinese journalism studies in any dichotomy relating to state, market, public, liberal or authoritarian, which has been the obsession of previous research (Zhao, 2000; He, 2000), and I treat literature as a form of academic evidence. From another aspect, this research justifies its engagement with gatekeeping studies through setting out from fieldwork observation. My field experience leads me to choose theory focusing on micro- and meso-level analysis of journalism. This is also proved as a decent approach to understand China-centered practices rooted in its indigenous culture (O'Brien, 2006). The following section will briefly introduce why and what to de-westernize in this thesis.

1.5.1 Moving from the west to China: what, why and how

As argued by Wasserman and de Beer (2009: 429), "all theory is situated somewhere —— there is no such thing as a decontextualized theory". As western journalism studies was introduced to China, the social, cultural, historical and even philosophical underpinnings of these journalism theories travelled along. In Qi's book (2014:65-66) documenting the knowledge flow from the west to the east, she writes as follows:

> Alien concepts and theories were carefully selected by Chinese innovators, who assimilated versions of these concepts and theories into an environment that was both hostile to Western thought in general and accommodating of select elements of Western thought, especially those elements that were conceived to strengthen Chinese capacities for independence and advancement in the emerging involvement in a world dominated by foreign powers.

Applying her argument in the context of Chinese journalism, I notice that the political-economy approach was the most widely used one in the early days to decode journalistic activities.

First, "press freedom as the central characteristic of (west) journalism" is the theme explored mostly in non-western journalism studies (Wasserman and de Beer, 2009:432). In China, this argument is understood in a way that the Party-state uses journalism and media as a political apparatus to disseminate the Party's ideology, and also as a commercial tool to harness the media market (Zhao, 2000; 2008). In doing so, freedom of the press is sabotaged by the Party.

The second reason is that doing fieldwork in China faces a double challenge: language and access (O'Brien, 2006). Language issues are related to the cultural assumptions in person to person communications (Thogersen, 2006; Sæther, 2006); issues of accessing news organizations are due to controls by the Party. Before I started my fieldwork, I was told by a former member of the *Financial Times* who is currently based in a Chinese university that, *as far as he knew*, doing fieldwork in Chinese news organizations, especially in the Party's media, was restricted, even as an intern (personal communication). In my case, my fieldwork also coincided with the People's Congress of the Communist Party in October 2017, which increased the

difficulty of accessing investigative journalists in Beijing. As I have no "persuasive" personal connections with media professionals in China, it turned out to be a *great* adventure for me to get close to the journalists I interviewed. These interesting encounters will be introduced in Chapter Four.

In addition, the prevalence of digital media has increased the challenges of accessing these journalists, in this research. On the one hand, as the amount of Chinese investigative journalists decreased significantly from 334 in 2010 to 175 in 2017 (Zhang and Cao, 2017), the journalists I interviewed doubted their role, and in what ways investigative journalism should be performed. In-depth discussions regarding this will be in Chapter Five. On the other hand, digital media challenges our (also journalists') understanding of what ways we should approach journalism, as an academic discipline highlighting practical skills of news producing in universities or as a lucrative industry. This will be discussed in Chapter Two.

Taken together, Chinese journalism studies overseas has become a discipline dominated by the political-economy approach focusing on looking at the relationship between markets, state, and the public, as suggested by the literature published between 1990 and 2000. Subsequently, digital media is portrayed as a force which can introduce limited freedom to journalism among the scholarship in 2000s. Although existing literature does document and analyze how Chinese journalism has developed and freedom of the press has improved, such analysis is still in a loop concerning what is concerned in the west. It ignores or downplays the hazards and potential threats coming along with the digital presence as another "dangerous power".

The challenges from the accessing field, language, culture and academic tradition shape studies on Chinese journalism as a Western-interested discipline in which scholars adopt western-based theories and concepts to re-interpret the significance of journalism in China. The imperatives of local and indigenous phenomena are likely to be ignored or simplified as time goes by, because the academic tradition has been established on a solid foundation to examine Chinese journalism from a conventional standpoint. This conventional understanding of Chinese journalism is enhanced through a comparative framework with the studies of journalism in western societies (Hallin and Mancini, 2004; Hanusch and Vos, 2019). What is examined most among the existing literature of non-western media studies, such as Chinese journalism, is what is absent in western journalism discourse (Curran and Park, 2000).

In this thesis, I suggest that Chinese journalism studies should be re-investigated outside the dominant western inquiries. As news production in China has been labelled as lack of press freedom for ages, this research explores the knowledge which is not extensively contained in current Chinese journalism studies. As noted by Waisbord and Mellado (2014:363), de-westernizing in communication studies, but not limited to, should be developed in four dimensions: subject, evidence, analytical framework and academic cultures. All of these dimensions are mentioned in the analysis above, justifying the significance of this research in the Chinese context. In the next section, I will introduce how this research justifies the imperative to examine the evidence which is from or has been downplayed in previous studies of Chinese

investigative journalists, meanwhile critically engaging with "a western-centric model of analysis" (Zhao, 2012:144).

1.5.2 Moving from the field to theory: issues on appropriation, adaptation and generalization of western theories

In the previous section, I discussed why Chinese journalism studies should be treated with a de-westernizing view and what should be de-westernized in Chinese journalism studies. In this section, I will introduce how I became aware of the flaws in previous studies regarding linking the China-characterized phenomena with western theories through engaging with investigative journalists in Beijing. To be specific, I identified three issues concerning the interplay of practices and theories that I mentioned above.

Firstly, as I spoke about the widely examined concepts in western journalism to my research participants, what impressed me most was that some of them demonstrated a hostile attitude to my applying western concepts to Chinese journalism, even though I explained what I meant by introducing these conceptual notions, such as professionalism, news as constructed reality, non-fiction writing, truth and so on. Taking journalism professionalism as an example, it is a concept relating to journalistic autonomy, job aspiration (Chan, Pan and Lee, 2004), social responsibility (Tong, 2011), and advocacy (Wang, 2016) in a Chinese context. However, these findings were not reflected among *any* of my participants' answers. This situation occurred among both novice and veteran journalists. Participant 17, a newspaper journalist, said "professionalism is not an indigenous concept and we do

not talk about it." This was echoed by Participant 19, a press editor and former investigative journalist with 20 years working experience in the field: "I hate people referring to those west-imported concepts and I have no idea why people say that." These negative responses nudged me to trace the relationship between western journalism theories and Chinese practices. One of the reasons is that the context of research between previous studies and mine was different. Nevertheless, except from this, how the meanings of western concepts are transformed and legitimated by Chinese journalistic practices is still a question that needs to be addressed continuously in an explicit manner (Li and Tang, 2012). In De Burgh's article that re-examines the notion of Chinese investigative journalists (2003), he contends that this journalistic group is so different from the west that academics should let the practitioners speak for themselves. Thus, I suggest that the existing literature on Chinese journalism and investigative journalism did not give enough space for the journalistic practitioners to define themselves, because scholars are more likely to follow the ways that investigative journalism is framed in the west to examine what appears in China.

Secondly, western concepts should be adapted frequently to fit into Chinese contexts, rather than seeking a unified explanation or standard within an established framework. For instance, the norm of objectivity in Chinese journalism in the 1930s was emphasized for its political implication that newspapers should represent public opinion rather than being used by the political elites (Maras and Nip, 2015). Later on, Tong (2011:99-100) argues that "claim to objectivity" is a key pillar of professional

value among Chinese investigative journalists. This notion represents "avoiding expressing views directly but making the report include facts and views from different sources" (Tong, 2011:100). In my research, what is suggested by participants is similar to what Tong expressed, *but* journalists consider that this fits more into the notion of "balance". "Being balanced is the most important thing, which can never be abandoned", Participant 11 said.

Objectivity was not in the center of journalism discourse when I examined their practices, for two reasons. On the one hand, journalists have to be cautious of the political risk (Hassid, 2016), so facts touch the taboo of the Party cannot be published (further discussion in Chapter Seven). On the other hand, "as I started to carry out a piece of investigative reporting, I had already demonstrated my view", said Participant 16. "I know what social issue I want to address through investigation. So, being balanced is much more crucial". The connotations of key concepts keep changing and require researchers to review them to fit the context frequently.

Thirdly, even though extensive scholarship claims to adopt a bottom-up perspective to discuss the practices of investigative journalists (Tong, 2011; Wang, 2016; Repnikova, 2017), it is still hard to avoid generalizing journalistic practices with a set of norms, values or principles, which falls into a normative approach to examining journalistic practices. This generalization can be understood as downplaying the experience of *journalistic individuals* and their perceptions of news production, which is rarely observed from existing studies. Looking at the individual characteristics of journalists can inform us of the nuanced variances in a particular

journalistic group and how these nuances accumulate, and then, reshape journalistic practices at a micro-level.

Two reasons drove me to pay attention to this aspect. First, I noticed that the investigative journalists I interviewed shared very different views in terms of the same news story, which led their investigation and reporting into different directions. Such differences can be seen from their *personal* attitude towards the news story and perceptions of the importance of the event. This variance comes from the years of working experience of journalists and the personal experiences of journalists in the journalism field. Personal experience refers to whether a journalist has worked as another type of media professional or not, such as a beat journalist or an online journalist. One journalist who was a beat journalist suggested that being an investigative journalist gave her a sense of honor, but investigative journalists sometimes lack a comprehensive understanding of the policy-making and policy-setting from the top-down. This is because they get used to considering that power is evil and speak for the social classes at the bottom of society (Participant 6). As suggested by O'Brien (2006; 2018), scholars working on Chinese social science studies should be "down-to earth", because the relationship among different social actors is *intangible*. To practice a "down-to-earth" research, I pay attention to these variances among the journalists interviewed.

Second, to know the variance among investigative journalists, it is important to step out of the conventional understandings that journalistic activities adhere to the norms and principles identified in the literature. Emphasizing the differences among

individual journalists can make the connection between theories/concepts and practices more robust (Qi, 2014), by analysing what the difference implies rather than focusing on the difference itself. It helps to expand the body of evidence to improve the inclusivity of western theories (Waisbord and Mellado, 2014). Therefore, this is the second reason that drives me to concern the variance of individual investigative journalist in Beijing. In doing so, I suggest this is the true way to de-westernize Chinese journalism studies.

To sum up this section, I discussed why I think de-westernizing Chinese journalism studies is necessary and what should be de-westernized. I suggest that de-westernization in this research is a process to re-examine the interplay of western-centric theories and China-characterized phenomena in journalism studies. As Sparks (2012) notes, it is important to know all the aspects of Chinese society as scholars explore and make sense of the changes (in the media). Driven by the interviews and field encounters, this research explores the practices of investigative journalists in Beijing and values the subtle changes within this journalistic community at both an individual and an organizational level of analysis. Then I locate this research in the realm of sociological studies of news production. Such locality of this research is also evidenced by my extensive engagement with the field and the necessity of de-westernization.

1.6 Thesis structure

In Chapter Two, I introduce the background and context of this thesis. I argue that the media environment in China is characterized by its political control by the Party and

the power holders, but further challenges arise from the prevalence of the digital media. Against this backdrop, while Chinese investigative journalists adapt to coercion from the Party, they are under urgent pressure to adjust their role and perceptions of their news work in China. This chapter tries to seek evidence from the existing scholarship to justify the reasons why I located my emphasis of this research on the digital media.

In Chapter Three, I review the key debates and elements on gatekeeping studies in journalism. I engage with these debates regarding gatekeeping by looking at the key processes and practices of news production at different social levels of analysis, based on western knowledge. My review aims to show how western scholars discuss gatekeeping practices and what challenges the digital media introduce into journalism practices and research as well.

In Chapter Four, I introduce how I carried out 25 in-depth interviews with investigative journalists in Beijing in 2017. This chapter also explains why, before I engaged with this sample of journalists, I spent six weeks in an online news organization and left afterwards. Moreover, by introducing these detailed encounters in the field, I stress the importance of de-westernizing Chinese journalism studies from the perspective of methodological application.

In Chapter Five, I discuss how the critical nature of investigative journalism in China is diminishing from four aspects: the role of investigative journalists in Chinese society, the social contributions they and their reporting make, the digital impacts on the circulation of investigative reporting, and the boundary between investigative

journalism and daily journalism. This chapter echoes the concerns I put forward in Chapter One and what I examined in Chapter Two. It also provides indications for us to look at Chinese investigative journalism differently.

In Chapter Six, I argue that investigative journalists have to consider the public's taste for news by looking at the digital news agenda, but that journalists still dominate the selection process by reporting what is relevant in terms of the public interest and public power. This chapter also argues that organizational constraints on journalistic activities are not only bureaucratically constructed, but also influenced by digital presence. Journalists have to make a reconciliation by analyzing the social illness reflected from the news events. This chapter outlines themes of changing practice among investigative journalists to address these public desires and public challenges of control.

In Chapter Seven, I look at how investigative journalists in China source news. I argue that while offline verification is still the major approach for journalists to seek out facts, increases in mis-/dis-information in the social media trap journalists in an online verification process that they find moves them to more traditional means of fact-checking, including face-to-face verification.

In Chapter Eight, by highlighting the influences that social factors at both individual and organizational levels bring to investigative journalists in Beijing, I conclude that the production of investigative reporting is complicated and threatened by the prevalence of digital media. Through looking at the practices of investigative journalists in Beijing, I recommend that political control from the Party-state on this

journalistic community is not at the center of the identified constraints on Chinese news production in 2017. This argument also implies that Chinese journalism studies should be scrutinized beyond the limit of conventional western theories and assumptions, which can be achieved by methodological improvement and theoretical adaptation. Situating Chinese journalism studies in a global context, this research also has implications on how to build connections between literature and empirical evidence. It draws a conclusion that the nuanced variances among individual journalists should be taken seriously to de-westernize Chinese journalism studies, from which we can observe how journalists at the micro level respond to changes at the macro level.

Chapter Two: Context and Background

2.1 Introduction

This chapter introduces the structure of the Chinese media system and how journalism and investigative journalism have developed within this system. As the Chinese media are under the control of the Party-state at all the times, I suggest that the public's desire of engaging in news production and information diffusion is empowered by the digital media, and, in fact, characterizes this media system today. The media system I refer to in this chapter is not only an institutionalized system set and controlled by the Party, but also a dynamic system in transition, which underscores the opportunities and challenges brought by the public. Moreover, I argue that the characteristics of the Chinese media system observed at the macro level are not appropriate for capturing the characteristics of journalistic practices at the micro level. The media and journalism system in China is not constructed in a monolithic way as can be observed from the constantly changing strategies that journalists have employed to make their reporting accessible to the public.

First, I introduce how media reform in the 1980s contributed to limited freedom for the Chinese media and journalism. Second, I examine how the media system has been mapped out since the media reform and what major institutional settings have been used to consolidate the Party-state's governance of this system. Third, I discuss the relationship between traditional media and online media, thus emphasizing how the digital media transition has been taking place in China. Fourth, I introduce the key debates in the study of Chinese journalism against the backdrop of

the digital transition. Last, I discuss how investigative journalism has become a distinct form of journalism and survives in China.

2.2 Chinese media reform: media, audience and the system

Media reform in the late 1970s is a watershed in Chinese media development and was an important part of the economic reforms of 1978 (Zhao, 1998). This reform brought about unprecedented changes in the Chinese media and public-related media practices (Zhang, 2000; Tong, 2011; Yu, 2006). Before the reform, the Chinese media system was notable for its role as the mouthpiece of the Party. Media reform altered this situation for the 1980s and beyond (Hong and Cuthbert, 1991). Now, the Chinese media not only serves to disperse the Party's propaganda but must also pluralize media products to maintain their incomes (Akhavan-Majid, 2004; Li and Liu, 2009; Hong and Cuthbert, 1991).

In the beginning of this reform, the TV industry responded rapidly to the reform and increased the diversity of TV programs (Zhao, 1998), laying a good foundation for the emergence of "watchdog journalism" (Zhao, 2000). The mutual benefits enjoyed by investigative journalism and the TV industry will be discussed in detail later in this chapter (see 2.5.2). Newspaper groups at different administrative levels were also encouraged by the Party to collaborate with non-state actors, such as private and semi-private media companies, to increase revenue (Akhavan-Majid, 2004). Specifically, Akhavan-Majid (2004:557) states that "the number of non-party papers published by various social and scientific institutions and mass organizations began to multiply rapidly, leading to the rise of non-party papers as the dominant

media in China during the 1990s". Evening newspapers, municipal newspapers and weekly newspapers appeared, which significantly increased the diversity of printed media (Li and Liu, 2009). The co-existence of the Party's media and private commercial media was the most distinct characteristic of the Chinese media landscape at that point in time and set the tone of the media transition to follow.

In addition to the media itself, this media reform also altered the public's understanding of the media and the relationship between the media and its consumers (Yu, 2006). Zhang (2000) notes that after the reform, media consumers, namely, the "masses (*qun zhong*)", no longer passively consumed media products. Their demands for media products became integrated into the production of media content, which led to the changing role of the public from "the masses" to "the audience". "Audience is an alien concept that gained currency in the reform discourse precisely because in effect it de-politicizes the media–masses relationship and opens up a new discursive field in which issues such as service, information, professionalism, and even diversity may and do arise during the reform era" (Yong, 2000:618). Therefore, the role of media reform in Chinese media developments cannot be ignored due to the economic contributions it has made. In terms of contributions to media freedom, scholars have doubts as to what those contributions might be, if they exist (Zhao, 2008; Chu, 1994).

The media still do not enjoy a high degree of freedom compared with the Western media (Brady, 2008). It is important to note that a political decision was made to include the media reform of 1978 in the Chinese political-economic reform, *Opening Policy* (Li and Liu, 2009). That is, this media reform was part of a political

policy aimed at facilitating the Chinese economy (Hong and Cuthbert, 1991). Ideologically, the reform represented the interest of the Party and was implemented under the guidance of the Party (Zhao, 1998). Economically, traditional media organizations received financial endorsements from the Party (Akhavan-Majid, 2004). In doing so, the Party justified their control over the media organizations as being necessary for helping the media enter the market (Brady, 2008). Such control continues today and is complicated by the emergence of new media forms and hybrid structures.

2.2.1 Chinese media system: structure, function and management

The formation and stratification of the media system can be observed from three aspects: structure, function and management. Firstly, structural changes brought about by media reform meant that the Party's endorsement of media marketization partially decentralized political control of the media at the provincial and local levels (Wu, 2000; Zhao, 1998; He, 2000). The reform started by widening the media distribution outlets geographically, especially in terms of the press. For instance, the Chinese Communist Party tried to encourage the start of new newspapers at the municipal, provincial and county levels (Shao et al., 2016). One of the key strategies the Party used was to loosen regulations controlling the management and licensing of newspapers (Stockmann, 2013).

Secondly, the changes in the functions of the media are related to the structural changes that the industry underwent. While maintaining its propagandist function, the media was used to increase profit-making (Zhao, 1998). In Zhao's (2012:155) further

research, she summarizes the distinctive results of media reform as being a merger between the "party organ sector and market-based post-Mao mass press sector". The "market-based" sector played horizontal and vertical roles. Horizontally, it was crucial in creating a wider spectrum, that is, media diversification (Shao et al., 2016; Wu, 2000; Zhao, 1998). According to Shao et al. (2016), it used two strategies to accomplish media diversification. One strategy was to take public needs into consideration, while the other was to increase the number of entertainment programs, especially on TV. Vertically, this sector deepened the reform by promoting business operations at different levels (Stockmann, 2013), including seeking advertisements.

Thirdly, the media reform introduced administrative management changes. Benefitting from the shift in its function, the management of media organizations could be observed in editorial work and line of administration (Stockmann, 2013). This economic reform continues to today in parallel with the digitization of the mainstream media (Zhang and Guo, 2019). According to Wang and Sparks (2019a), apart from producing news, journalists today have other roles in business and advertising media products on websites, as these non-news-gathering activities have been added to journalists' working routines. Overall, from the 1980s to today, media groups in China have applied different approaches to increasing income. However, media reform in China cannot be understood simply in terms of the economy and market. Media reform was launched as part of a national economic policy, under continued Party controls (He, 2000). It is also undeniable that media marketization introduced new roles to the party-led media. Some scholars have portrayed the

relationship between the state and market as a tug-of-war (He, 2000; Li and Tang, 2012). Regardless, this relationship resulted in many contradictions in the Chinese media system and also among media professionals in the long run.

2.2.2 Contradictions in Chinese media system

In Zhao's (1998) seminal study on the Chinese media system, she begins by stating that the Chinese media system is full of contradictions with origins going back to the historical struggles over the establishment of the nation and political governance. She (1998) argues that in 1980-1990s, the Chinese media did not enjoy much freedom despite the importation of marketization and commercialization. These liberalization forces had limited power in pushing the media towards greater freedom. One of the most compelling arguments Zhao makes is that the media became a commercial service and product when it entered the market, and the Party learned to use the media, especially television, as an ideological tool to disseminate their form of governance. Ideological consensus was masked and legitimized through the necessity of maintaining social solidarity. In the 1990s, the media system became a mix of political control and market forces.

Ten years later, Zhao (2008) analyses the dynamic relationship between the market and the Party again. In this later work, she suggests that other social forces increased the tensions between the Party forces and marketization, for example, the uprisings and social conflicts in provincial areas. The struggle between the economic base and superstructure was partially transformed into a struggle over non-state factors with the rise of public intellectuals and the internet. In terms of the role of the

media system in this social transformation, Zhao (2008:11) frames the development of Chinese communications as a confrontational site, where commercial potential, economic sectors and social stratifications converge. Later on, Zhao (2012) finds that one of the most distinguished characteristics of the Chinese media is its hybrid structure, which does not distinguish between vertical and horizontal modes in classifying media ownership, as Hallin and Mancini (2004) have argued as well.

Although the media operations in China have been marketized since the 1980s, all domestic media are still the property of the Party (Tong, 2018). This situation increases the contradictions among the state, market and society, leading to a survival model for the Chinese media that encompasses more than just obedience or resistance. Meng (2018: 8) argues in her book that power relationships involving the media sector are "often simplistic or one dimensional". In particular, she says, "the complex power matrix of international vs domestic, Party organ vs market-oriented media, traditional vs new, and elite vs grassroots is crudely simplified into a battle between censorship and freedom of expression" (Meng, 2018:7). The existing literature on the Chinese media most frequently adopts a Western framework and sees the media as being linked to democracy (Tong, 2011). Namely, the public can be well-informed and educated by the media if the media and its professionals enjoy a high degree of autonomy (Deuze, 2005). What is suggested in this section (see 2.2.2) is that more de-Westernized aspects should be considered when observing the Chinese media system and journalism, in general. Such a de-Westernized approach does not mean that the research context must be shifted. Rather, the flaws in theories

based on the Western experience must be acknowledged and more views that contrast with or do not exist in the Western scope must be used. In the next section, I will introduce how the Chinese media has survived the Party's governance and what challenges, opportunities, and constraints are revealed in this relationship.

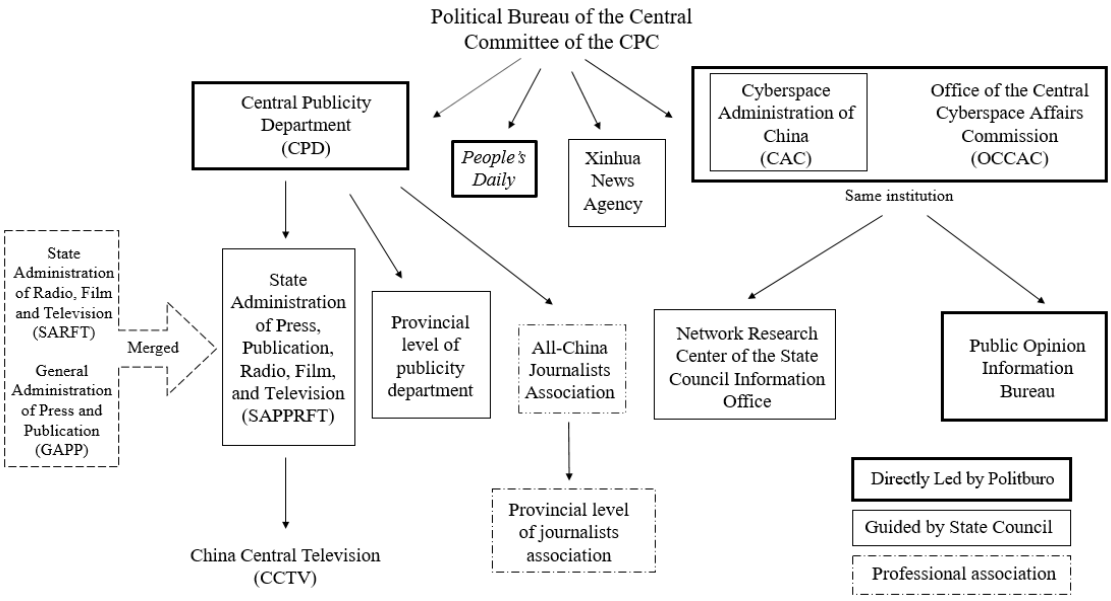
2.2.3 The institutional settings of Chinese media system

Addressing the complexity in the media system resulting from the media reform, Luo (2015:52) considers the Chinese media system to be a "dynamically balanced system" with six driving forces: the party, government, capital, individual (citizen), professional and cultural forces. After identifying these six forces, Luo (2015:65) notes that the Chinese media system illustrates a "collaboration and competitive relationship" and that all the forces work within the Chinese cultural and philosophical framework. In this scenario, the challenges from state forces are examined most heavily. The challenges include the Party's regulatory stipulations and the government's demand that the media practice marketization (Luo, 2015). Extensive research argues that the power struggles among the state, market, society and even digital forces keep reshaping our understanding of the media system in China, but it is still controlled through its political-economy role (He, 2000; Zhao, 2000; Zhao, 2008; Wang, 2016). In the next subsection, I will discuss how the Party's political control is achieved through the institutional and organizational regulations released by different administrative divisions and geographical regions.

2.2.3.1 The head of media divisions: horizontal structure and platforms

According to Brady (2008:15-16), the Central Publicity Department of the Communist Party of China (also known as the Central Propaganda Department of the CPC) takes charge of all the policy-making, administrative regulations, information dissemination, national propaganda, and thought works regarding the media and communications in China through different forms of orders. The head of this department is appointed by the Politburo (Figure 1). Inside the Central Publicity Department (CPD), there are more than 20 internal organizations that support its operation. The CPD also has direct leadership of all the important bureaus for media and information dissemination at various administrative levels, such as the *People's Daily*, Xinhua News Agency, the State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film, and Television (SAPPRFT) and All-China Journalists Association.

Figure 1 Institutional systems of media and information sector[10]



Horizontally, these organizations mentioned above are the leading institutions for the different forms of media organizations in China. In 2013, the General Administration of Press and Publication (GAPP) merged into the SAPPRFT. The SAPPRFT is responsible for licensing and approving the contents of all the types of media. For instance, in August 2019, the SAPPRFT released an announcement that TV serials with historical costume drama and idol drama themes were suspended from being broadcast on TV due to the approach of the 70th National Day of China on 1st October, 2019. Printed media, such as books, newspapers, magazines, are also under the control of the SAPPRFT. This organization not only regulates the publication and circulation of printed media but also licenses media organizations to carry out activities for news production. All the journalists in China have to be licensed and

[10] This figure is inspired by the graphic illustration from Brady (2008) and Tsai (2016). Brady (2008) explains how the propaganda of the CCP works with a flow chart and Tsai (2016) explores how such control moves into the online environment.

carry a press card (*ji zhe zheng*) issued by the SAPPRFT (Figure 2). With the press card, journalists are approved to carry out interviews and write news. In terms of the internet-based media, online journalistic activities are also subjected to the control of the Party.

Figure 2 Press Card[11] (*ji zhe zheng*)

In order to regulate the online behaviour of media users, the Bureau of Online Media Administration and Regulation was added to the information governance structure. In 2006, the Network Bureau of the Central Propaganda Department was established to mobilize public opinion online (Tsai, 2016). Within this bureau, there are two

[11] This press card released by SAPPRFT in March 2020 is the latest version. Available at: http://press.nppa.gov.cn/reporter/channels/254.shtml (accessed on 22 April 2020)

agencies, namely, the Public Opinion Information Bureau and the Network Research Centre of the State Council Information Office (Tsai, 2016). The establishment of the Office of the Central Cyberspace Affairs Commission (OCCAC) in 2014 signified the tightening of the Party-state's control over the Chinese internet. This institution, also referred to as the Cyberspace Administration of China (CAC) ("one institution with two names"[12] is a Chinese political phenomenon), is at the same administrative level as the CPD in China and under the direct leadership of President Xi Jinping. Currently, this institution is responsible for censoring, deleting and blocking information on the internet, as the Party aims to strengthen its ideological control and eradicate dissent on the internet (Benney and Xu, 2018). In 2017, the CAC urged all the online media platforms, mainly news websites and searching engines, to strengthen the regulation of information with regards to eight issues: distorting governmental policy, spreading mis-/dis-information, distorting history, vulgar content, sensational content, plagiarized content, promoting the worship of money and lavish lifestyles, content against public ethics and content generating moral panic (CAC, 2017).

Faced with this situation, the OCCAC has launched many special actions to regulate the posting of information and accessing user generated content (Creemers,

[12] "One institution with two names" means an institution can have two different functions, such as governmental, propaganda, administrative, legislative functions and so on. For instance, as mentioned here, the Cyberspace Administration of China (CAC) and the Office of the Central Cyberspace Affairs Commission (OCCAC) are the same institution and led by President Xi directly. The CAC does more policy making, whereas the OCCAC oversees propaganda, censorship and the monitoring of the internet.

2017; Tong, 2018). On the one hand, this institution tries to clean up the “unhealthy” information involving pornography, violence, terrorism and the information promoting anti-mainstream social views, such as worshipping money. On the other hand, the OCCAC also cracks down on the illegal use of private information. For instance, in 2016, a high school student suffered a heart attack and died after she experienced a telecommunications swindle. Her personal information from a database for university entrance examinations in Shandong province was leaked online. As this event became breaking news, the OCCAC established a special group aimed to stop the illegal leaking of private information. Some fraudulent companies were eradicated quickly in the following months. Soon after that, the People’s Congress passed the China Cyber Security Law in 2017.

Therefore, it cannot be denied that the control of the flow of information among different media platforms in China is omnipresent. MacKinnon (2011) states that China has entered an age of “networked authoritarianism”. She describes a situation in which “an authoritarian regime embraces and adjusts to the inevitable changes brought by digital communication” (MacKinnon, 2011:33). Chan (2019:66) further notes that network authoritarianism emphasizes the “high concentration of political power and news power.” Specifically, the offline control and censorship of different forms of speech and publications have moved online.

Nevertheless, this official response is only one aspect of online information control. The presence of disinformation and harmful information also legitimizes the control of the Party. In July 2016, the OCCAC provided a list of news organizations it

regarded as credible information-providing organizations[13]. The news and information from the listed organizations are recognized as reliable materials of sources that can be used and forwarded by other commercial media. The news organizations on the list range from the central to local and include newspapers, websites, radio and television. Among the websites, commercial websites are excluded, such as *Sina*, *Netease*, *Tencent*. Most commercial websites are portal media that aim to provide news, email and networking services (CNCTST, 2018:198). The current Chinese media landscape, especially internet-based media, requires effective regulations, as problematic information can damage the judgement of the public and the authority of journalists.

2.2.3.2 The subdivisions of media organization: administrative levels

The complexity of the Chinese media system can be observed from not only the horizontal layout of the bureaucratic structure, but also the vertical administration levels occurring from the central to the local levels. At the central level, the *People's Daily*, Xinhua News Agency and China Central TV Station are the three major mouthpieces of the Party's propaganda, whereas the *People's Daily* and Xinhua News Agency are also ranked at the ministerial level. Each institution is in the top rank of its situated media platforms. Beyond the media institutions at the central level, regional media and provincial media outlets are also mapped in a hierarchical order and receive guidance from the central. Even though the central level media are accused of being tough in terms of strengthening ideological controls across the whole

[13] The list of the internet news and information sources (*hu lian wang xin wen xin xi gao yuan dan wei ming dan*,) as of July 2016 Is available at: http://www.cac.gov.cn/2016-08/08/c_1119356489.htm (accessed on 10 September 2019)

China, research has shown that provincial governments in China may not always answer the call of the central government (Zhao, 2000). Provincial governments have power when it comes to controlling local information dissemination. The relationship between the central and local governments is discordant at times. As a result, the central government has started to encourage "cross-regional supervision reporting (*yi di jian du*)", which means that journalists can report on what happens in other localities (Svensson, 2012). Put simply, cross-regional reporting represents an attempt to avoid the bans and blockages local media are subjected to and increase the possibility of publication (Tong, 2010; Svensson, 2012). On the one hand, the central government controls the media sector by enhancing its structural administration in institutional settings; on the other hand, these kinds of centralized controls are adopted at the sub-administrative levels to rein in the media in local areas.

2.3 Chinese media in transformation

As we now know how the Chinese media system is mapped from top to down in the above section, this section will introduce the major media platforms in China and how they operate. This section argues that the current media transformation, from the printed media to the internet to digital media, is also a reform that answers the call of the public usage of media. This call of transformation in Chinese media is digitally constructed and socially provoked by the public, which characterizes the media practices mostly today. I will first outline the ebbs and flows of various media platforms and then analyze how these developments chart the flow of Chinese media in transformation.

2.3.1 Printed media and its decline

Studies on Chinese newspapers have a long history. “Most of these histories emphasize the institutional development of the newspapers they study and provide data on their editors and contributions, financial management, circulation figures and political affiliations” (Mittler, 2004: 4). This passage is found in her book on the textual power of *Shen Bao*, a newspaper established in 1872 in Shanghai by a British merchant, Ernest Major. Indeed, there was a long tradition in China of newspapers being treated as vehicles for propaganda way before the birth of the CCP (Mittler, 2004). Harrison (2003: 83) notes that scholars were less likely to treat newspapers in China as a medium for delivering information because newspapers in modern China (1840-1949) often contained information on a “mixture of Chinese-run and foreign-run districts”, which symbolized the tension between “semi-colonial or quasi-colonial urban centres” and foreign powers. After the CCP was formed, newspapers in China impressed the world with their role in disseminating the Party’s ideological control (Zhao, 1998; De Burgh, 2000).

Benefitting from the media reform throughout the 1980s, the types and functions of newspapers were enriched. In addition to playing the role of disseminating the Party’s ideology, emerging newspapers at different administrative levels attempted to increase the diversity of news topics by taking readers’ interests into account (Stockmann, 2013). In the beginning of this century, the SAPPRFT (formerly GAPP) began to grant more licenses to commercial newspapers to boost the market (Meng, 2018). Advertising revenue is the major source of income for

commercial newspapers in China (Li and Liu, 2009). Since the media reform, governmental sponsorship has reduced its financial support to media organizations. As newspapers receive less support from the Party, they have more freedom to select news topics and more space to report on controversial topics (Stockmann, 2013). Thus, commercial newspapers have better reputations among readers because they can have different views from the party press while reporting on controversial events (Tong, 2011).

According to Sparks et al.'s study (2016), the circulation of newspapers in China kept increasing after 2004 and then began to decline in 2013. Based on the figures in the *Report on the Development of China's Media Industry* (Cui, Hang and Zhou, 2018), the number of newspapers has been decreasing constantly for the past 10 years, while the number of magazines has kept rising for commercial reasons, as seen in Table 1 below.

Zhang and Li (2018) note that during the recent decade, 44 newspapers, mainly metro-newspapers in big cities, ceased publication. One of the major reasons for newspapers' decline is that their advertisement revenue declined, making it difficult to maintain the cost of publication. The *Beijing Times* (*jing hua shi bao*) and *Fazhi Evening* (*fa zhi wan bao*) are two major metro-newspapers located in Beijing that were suspended, then shuttered in 2017 and 2018, respectively. The *Beijing Times* was a municipal newspaper that was part of the *People's Daily* press group established in 2001. Later on, *Fazhi Evening* announced its intention to integrate its news production team with *China Youth Daily* to develop the digital platform, *Beijing*

Headlines. On 1st January 2020, seventeen newspapers suspended operations nationwide.

Meanwhile, more and more newspaper organizations started to invest in online content, such as AI newswriting, which plays a critical role in news reporting (Zhang and Feng, 2019), especially in reporting breaking news. By June 2019, the CAC had licensed 1329 internet-based news organizations at different administrative levels (CAC, 2020). One such famous and successful online news organization, which was founded in Shanghai, is *The Paper* (*peng pai*). This news organization is considered to be "a state-sanctioned digital media experiment aimed at creating a new form of journalism that appeals to the public and helps to disseminate Party propaganda" (Repnikova and Fang, 2019: 679). Therefore, these Party-endorsed projects, which have moved from offline to online, have doomed Chinese newspapers. As stated in the *Report* (2018), the golden age of newspapers lasted 20 years, and newspaper reforms cannot make a difference anymore.

Table 1 Printed-based media circulation (Cui et al., 2018)

Year Item	2014	2015	2016	2017[14]	2018	2019[15]
Newspaper type	1912.00	1906.00	1894.00	1884.00	1871.00	-
Magazine type	9966.00	10014.00	10084.00	10130.00	10139.00	-
Newspaper circulation (a hundred million)	463.90	430.09	390.07	362.50	337.30	315.00
Magazine circulation (a hundred million)	30.95	28.78	26.97	24.90	22.90	22.00

The decline of printed media is also due to the call from the central government to boost the digital economy via media convergence and integration (Repnikova and Fang, 2019). On the other hand, the increasing number of Chinese netizens and the improved technological infrastructure indicated that the traditional media outlets had to adjust their survival strategies and move into the online sphere.

2.3.2 A digital backdrop: technological empowerment and netizens resistance

Many studies have argued that internet-based media platforms in China have empowered Chinese citizens in terms of accessing information and facilitating public discussions (Yang, 2011; Wang, 2016; Nip and Fu, 2016). Since the introduction of the internet in China in 1987, it has become a place where different social forces have

[14] Data for 2017 and 2018 are available at: http://www.stats.gov.cn/tjsj/ndsj/2019/indexch.htm (accessed on 23 April 2020)
[15] Data for 2019 is available at: http://data.stats.gov.cn/easyquery.htm?cn=C01 (accessed on 23 April 2020)

fought, united and struggled with each other (Yang, 2011). According to Hassid (2016:133), the internet has become a crucial part of the Chinese media system because "it brings systemic and irreversible changes to the Chinese political system". Such an argument is more situated in a context that treats the internet as a tool for political governance. Taken together, the current debates concerning the Chinese internet can be classified into two streams, that is, the innovations made possible by the daily use of technology and the political discourse taking place on the internet.

2.3.2.1 Technological innovation and Chinese netizens

The first stream examines various internet-based media platforms, such as WeChat, Weibo and QQ and how the practices of different social groups are inspired technologically through the use of the privileged functions of internet-based platforms (Harwit, 2017; Herold, 2014; Tu, 2016; Ma, 2013; Meng, 2011). This research stream has benefitted from the rapid development of the Chinese internet and telecommunications system. According to the CNNIC (China Internet Network Information Centre), as of June 2019, the internet penetration in China had reached 61.2%, and the number of netizens (*wang min*) had reached 854 million. Access to the internet through mobile devices has skyrocketed to 99.1%. Through the use of mobile devices, user-generated content (UGC) has diversified as have professionally generated content (PGC) and occupationally generated content (OGC), which focus on producing specialized content. The technological achievements associated with the internet have become an important index by which to measure the level of infrastructure in the Chinese communication system. Some scholars have put forward

the idea that Chinese society is a platform society, indicating that the institutional governance of the Party and the daily practices of the public are mostly based on a well-developed technological infrastructure (De Kloet et al., 2019).

2.3.2.2 The public usage of digital media

Compared with the first stream, the second stream argues that the emerging forms of digital resistance and online mobilization brought about by netizens are a sign of another liberal force emerging after marketization (Xiao, 2011; Hassid, 2016; Tong, 2015c; Gao and Stanyer, 2014; Yang, 2003). The latest survey conducted by the CNNIC found that the main internet activities netizens engage in are instant messaging (99.2%), searching the internet (83.0%) and online news browsing (80.9%) (CNNIC, 2020:29). However, the internet is more than a tool for retrieving information in China. It is also a place that resembles a "public sphere", that is, it is a place where online citizens (netizens) can express and exchange ideas in a comparatively free manner (Hassid, 2016; Yang, 2009). Although the Chinese government has been developing new strategies to keep the internet under its control, such as filtering sensitive words (Xu, 2014), netizens can always find new approaches for holding their discussions and enlarge the impact of debates, which puts pressure on the government and mainstream media to echo public demands (Tang and

Sampson, 2012; Gao and Stanyer, 2014). Here, mainstream media[16] refers to national official news websites, regional official news websites and commercial news websites (Guo, 2018:2462). As the prevalence of digital media has increased, the public has learned to take full advantage of portable devices and mobile communications to express their demands.

2.3.3 Social networking and digital presence

Given that the Chinese internet is a major terrain for accessing and sharing information, social media is the emphasis of this terrain. Different terms are used interchangeably in the Chinese context to describe the online platforms where the public can access and share information, such as social media, social networking media, user-generated content (media), self-media and we-media (Tong, 2015c; Zhang and Guo, 2019; Jian and Liu, 2018). In this research, I use "digital media" to indicate the collective group of internet-based media forms. Officially, social media (*she jiao mei ti*) has the same meaning as social networking (*she jiao wang luo*) in Chinese, namely, internet-based social networking platforms (CNNIC, 2017b). A social networking platform allows a wide range of netizens' activities with regard to communicating, disseminating and consuming to take place. The major social

[16] Mainstream media is a controversial concept in China. On the one hand, it refers to official media, which can represent the Party's official stance; on the other hand, it refers to a media outlet with influence on its audience (CNCTST, 2018:11). However, mainstream media was not mentioned frequently during the interviews I conducted. Instead, participants preferred to use the term "serious media" to describe the media that releases official and professional reporting and excludes propaganda/positive reporting. Hence, in the analysis of my interviews, I use serious media to describe the media organizations that the participants worked for.

networking platforms in China can be classified into 6 categories, as seen below (CNNIC, 2017b:5).

Table 2 Social networking categories (CNNIC, 2017b: 5)

Category	Examples
Instant messaging	QQ, WeChat, *Momo*, etc.
Comprehensive application[17]	QQ Space, *Sina Weibo*, WeChat moments, etc.
Picture and film	*Meipai*, *Miaopai*, etc.
Dating	*58jiaoyou*, *Shijijiayuan*, etc.
Community	*Baidu BBS*, *Zhihu*, etc.
Occupation	Linkedin, *Liepin*, etc.

Excluding social networking, most netizens (90.7%) use social media to browse the news (CNNIC, 2017a). In the case of breaking news, 68.4% of netizens would choose to search for more information online. Furthermore, 60.7% of netizens would use *Sina Weibo* (microblogging), a Chinese version of Twitter, to do so (CNNIC, 2017a). Live streaming is another platform from which netizens can obtain information. Taking *yizhibo* as an example, a live-streaming platform co-established by *Sina Weibo* and *Miaopai* in 2016, a full 42.3% of netizens use this platform to browse hot-button issues (CNNIC, 2017a).

While digital media prevails due to its portability and immediacy, it also has disadvantages. Since "post-truth" became a hot-button issue in the West in 2016, Chinese social media has been characterized by the spread of rumours and mis/disinformation in recent years (Zeng, Burgess and Bruns, 2019). Moreover,

[17] Comprehensive applications mean that the social networking applications integrate the function of instant message, browsing news, searching engine, e-commerce, entertainment, commercial client service on a single platform (CNNIC, 2017b: 5).

netizens' discussions about social affairs are very emotional and easy to influence (Tong, 2015d; Li, 2018), mostly due to the fact that more than half of social media users (54.8%) prefer to browse news that has been reposted by others (CNNIC, 2017a: 29). In addition, nearly one-third of users (32.9%) would repost the news they consume on social media. In this scenario, mis-/dis-information on social media mingles with opinions, facts and comments as it is circulated. A detailed discussion of this phenomenon is included in Chapter Seven.

Therefore, I suggest that the media transformation in China over the past decades should not be only understood in terms of political economy or technological development. The transformation of the Chinese media that continues today is legitimized by the public's desire to engage in social life, and it is achieved through the emerging media technologies. As the figures have demonstrated in this chapter, there are many indications that media production in China is being challenged by many non-state factors that have received limited attention so far. In the next section, I will discuss how these digital phenomena have altered the perception of the journalism industry in China.

2.4 Chinese journalism and journalism studies concerning China

Whilst journalism scholars in the West are concerned about what journalism will become along with the lengthy engagement of digital media in the news production of journalism professionals (Deuze and Witschge, 2020; Newman et al., 2019), the academic debates on Chinese journalism are concerned more about what journalism is. Such debates are both simple and complicated. In this section, prior to discussing

Chinese investigative journalism, I will firstly demonstrate how I have approached the literature regarding Chinese journalism studies through the inclusion of viewpoints from practitioners and academia. Then I will introduce what journalism is like in China today.

2.4.1 Chinese journalism studies as a simplified notion

Chinese journalism studies in contemporary China can be described simply as looking into the relationships among the public, the Party and journalism. Such relationships have been over-simplified by considering them in terms of dominance (Meng, 2018) and their repercussions on different interpretations of freedom, including freedom of speech (Esarey and Xiao, 2011), the autonomy of journalists (Chan, Pan and Lee, 2004) and free-market competition (Zhao, 2008).

First, Chinese journalism studies developed against the background of globalization. As Chinese scholars tried to fit their academic inquiries into journalism into global trends, it became quite important for them to think about journalism through the lens of Western logic, which examines the associations among the press, democracy and freedom. Zhou (2006:129) concludes the following after examining the research on media, journalism and audiences published in English academic journals from 1985-2002:

> Despite the low percentage of studies that employed theoretical frameworks, Chinese scholars had begun to test and develop Western classical theories, which proved that Chinese scholars had been following the steps of the academic world.

Second, this claim captures the most compelling characteristic of journalism in contemporary China, that is, that journalists either resist the Party or acquiesce with

the Party's control. Some researchers argue that journalists can be seen as an agency that channels the voices from the power holders and the public (Tong, 2015c; Wang, 2016), but journalists in China can never be considered as comprising an individual agency separate from the Party's governance. However, tensions among the Party, the public and journalism have escalated online in recent years (Tong, 2014; Yang, 2011). A discussion of what journalism is like in China cannot be removed from Chinese politics, but politics do not have to be amplified to the point of becoming an overarching discourse. This is the reason why I argue that journalism studies in China can be simplified to a certain degree.

2.4.2 Chinese journalism as a mixture of disciplines

In China, journalism studies are "complicated" since they lack clarity in terms of exactly what is being studied due to the incorporation of too many sub-divisions and contradictions (Li and Tang, 2012). As journalism studies are viewed as interdisciplinary (Steensen and Ahva, 2015) in the west, studies in China, in particular, mix the practices, knowledge and approaches from different disciplines. Here are two explanations for this situation.

First, the gap between journalism as an academic discipline and journalism as a practice is much wider and deeper than in the West and is described as "a gulf between beliefs and reality" (De Burgh, 2004:131). In the universities on mainland China, on the one hand, journalism has been taught according to the knowledge and experience imported from Western societies, mainly the US (Guo, 2012); on the other hand, the journalism curriculum also covers Chinese literature, Chinese history and

news editing, writing, filming and so on (De Burgh, 2000; 2003). The mixture of courses from different subjects and disciplines makes Chinese journalism a "hodgepodge". When graduates enter the journalism industry, it takes them some time to put what they learned in school into practice due to the various bureaucratic restrictions (De Burgh, 2003; Wu and Weaver, 1998; Yang and Arant, 2014). Although it cannot be said that journalism is taught in Chinese academic settings and that practised in the field are totally detached, the gap between the two does exist and generates confusion among journalists regarding their roles and understanding of news. I will analyse these dilemmas throughout the thesis.

Second, journalism studies in academia mix discourses from communications, the media, public relations, Chinese literature and even psychology because there are no clear boundaries. De Burgh (2000:553) writes:

> In China it is appropriate to lump together media school academics, media managers and journalists as 'media people' and to regard the accounts of academics as being at one with practitioners in a way that would not be the case in the West.

Indeed, his observation still works today. As announced by Tsinghua University in May 2020, which is ranked 16th in the world by QS World University Rankings, and the 1st among Asian universities, all undergraduate admissions in its journalism school will be cancelled from 2020. It means that journalism will no longer be available as one of the majors for undergraduate students in Tsinghua University. Instead, it will increase its admission of graduate students in journalism studies, which means undergraduate students who are majors in other disciplines can also apply for a master in journalism. This trend would strengthen the nature of the "hodgepodge" of

journalism in China.

More evidence can be seen from Chinese literature. Referring to the interpretations provided by the *Terminologies in Journalism and Communication Studies* (CNCTST, 2018:1), Chinese journalism studies covers three fields: history of journalism (*xin wen shi xue*), journalism theories (*xin wen li lun*) and journalism practice (*xin wen ye wu*)[18]. In recent years, journalism scholars have concentrated on investigating the relationships among journalism, the market and technology in China (e.g., Wang and Sparks, 2019a; Sparks et al., 2016; Wang, Sparks and Yu, 2018; Zhang and Feng, 2019). This trend is more evident in mainland publications, including some of the sources I used in thesis and official media reports on Chinese journalism and media developments (e.g., *2017 Annual Report on the Chinese Journalism Industry*). Little attention has been given to discussions on how journalism functions today and what practices count as journalism recently, whereas there are lengthy discussions concerning how to make profits through the use of communications and media technology. Thus, in the section below, I will discuss who the journalists are in China.

2.4.3 Searching for journalists in China

In the pioneering work done by Hugo De Burgh (2000, 2003, 2004), a British scholar who has traced the changes in Chinese journalism over the decades, the question as to what a journalist is in China keeps recurring. Even today, this question has not been

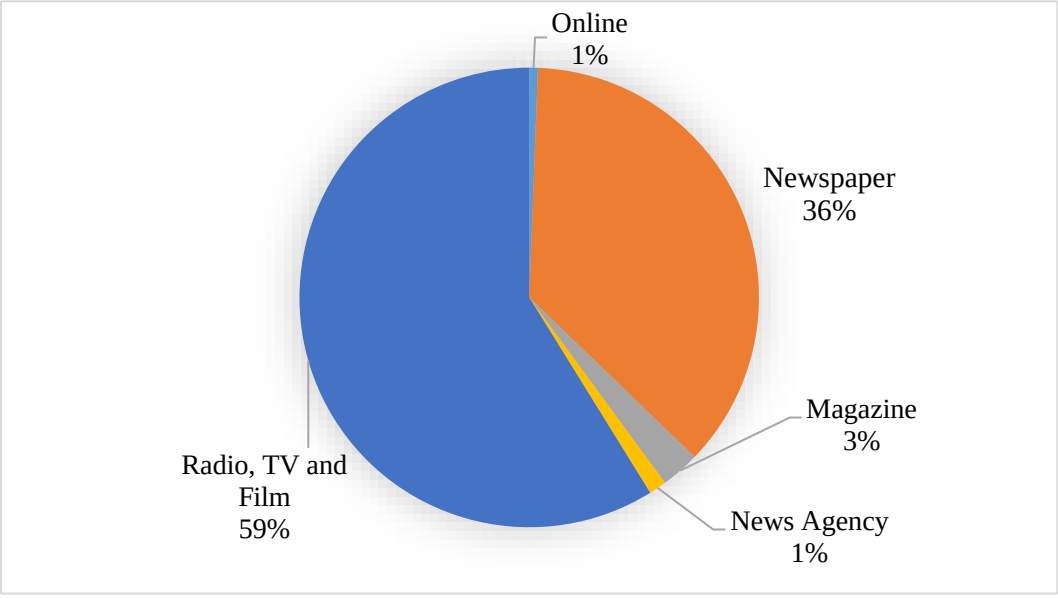
[18] This is my translation because the translations provided by this publication do not make sense: "*xin wen shi xue*" is translated as "historical journalism" (CNCTST, 2018:2); "*xin wen ye wu*" is translated as "journalism specialties" (CNCTST, 2018:1).

answered. The discussion below provides some approaches for learning about journalism and journalists in China by looking at the number of journalists, role perception, professionalism, job satisfaction and autonomy.

2.4.3.1 Demographics

The number of registered journalists (who had a press card) in China was 231,564 on 31st December 2017 (Chinese Journalists Association, 2018). Zhang and Li (2018) note that this number was subject to three consecutive annual (2015-2017) increases. The TV, radio and film industries employed the largest percentage at 59%, whereas, in second place, the newspaper industry employed 36% (Figure 3). Compared with 2016, the number of online journalists increased by 30.5% in 2017, furthermore, 72.1% of the journalists on the 2017 list held a bachelor's degree, and they were nearly evenly distributed between males and females (52% male, 48% female) (Zhang and Li, 2018).

Figure 3 Chinese journalists distribution (Zhang and Li, 2018)



2.4.3.2 Role perception

Whilst the number of registered journalists has been rising, it does not mean that the number of people producing news is rising, because some focus on marketing news. In an early survey carried out by Zhu et al. (1997), over 70% of the journalists in China (print and broadcast) considered interpretation to be a very important aspect of the jobs because their audiences had limited access to the truth. Later on, journalists began to perceive their roles as involving dissemination and advocacy (Pan and Chan, 2003), but this is not to say that the role Chinese journalists played in propaganda disappeared. Hassid (2011) argues that there are four types of journalists in China, each performing different roles: propagandist journalists (also called Party or mouthpiece journalists), American-style journalists (journalists who have adopted professional values in reporting, i.e., balanced reporting and objectivity), advocate journalists (journalists who write opinions and comments) and beat journalists. This list demonstrates "the endurance of literati values coexisting with both the modern professional and Party journalism values during the current journalistic professionalization in China" (Lin, 2010:421). Moreover, the introduction of digital media strengthened the hybridization of journalism roles (Xu and Jin, 2017). Research from Xu and Jin (2017) illustrates that Chinese digital journalists consider their roles to be those of interpreters and disseminators of both Party news and infotainment.

2.4.3.3 Journalistic professionalism

Journalistic professionalism in Chinese context is a debatable topic. Some scholars view professionalism as an imported notion that should be reinvented to fit the

Chinese situation (Pan and Lu, 2003), whereas some craft professionalism into a concept that covers a wide spectrum open to debate (Li, 2012; Lin, 2010). De Burgh (2004:105) argues that "Chinese journalism has some of the attributes of professionalism as identified in the West, but lacks others". One such attribute is impartiality, which is to maintain in Chinese society due to its political climate (De Burgh, 2004). There is agreement that the understanding of professionalism in Chinese journalism was brought about by media marketization. As media markets opened, journalists gradually became aware of what professionalism was while competing with their media peers (Pan and Lu, 2003). As some of the first researchers to study journalism professionalism in China, Pan and Lu (2003:211) developed it into a "discursive process of articulating what constitutes 'good journalism'". Professionalism is discussed more in Chinese academia than among practitioners. For practitioners, this concept is both alien and hollow (see Chapter Five).

2.4.3.3 Job satisfaction and journalistic autonomy

Chinese journalists are much more willing to discuss job satisfaction and autonomy than professionalism. Research conducted in the beginning of this century showed that journalists in Shanghai had a high degree of job satisfaction in terms of the autonomy they enjoyed in their work (Chan, Pan and Lee, 2004). Liu, Xiaoming and Wen (2018) find that journalists' satisfaction with their jobs has nothing to do with their perceptions of the Chinese media system, be they positive or negative. Although journalistic autonomy could be impaired due to constraints, this does not impact journalists' satisfaction with their jobs (ibid). Today, what frustrates journalists most

in China is their low income. In a recent survey conducted by a non-official journalists' association (*shenlancaijin*, 2019), 80% of the surveyed journalists say they have poor economic status, and 39% of them want to leave their jobs.

This section has reviewed the key debates in Chinese journalism studies. As seen above, journalism studies in China do not represent a clearly defined area. As a discipline, journalism mingles with the fields of media and communications rather than maintaining its own clear boundaries. This blurring of boundaries can also be seen in the institutional settings mentioned in the first section of this chapter, that is, all media professionals, including journalists, are regulated by the CPD and the SAPPRFT. That is, there is no separate institution in charge of journalistic affairs in China. A more in-depth discussion of Chinese investigative journalism follows.

2.5 From journalism to Chinese investigative journalism

This section discusses how Chinese investigative journalism appeared, thrived and declined. It argues that although the presence of Chinese investigative journalism was legitimized by the Party in the 1990s, this sense of legitimacy was situated at the institutional level and practiced from the top down. With the advent of the digital age, the public's right to know further legitimized investigative journalism. Limited studies have touched upon this aspect because Chinese investigative journalism is framed as state-sanctioned journalism (Repnikova, 2017) and less attention has been paid to the dynamic shifts in social powers, that is, how non-state actors came to influence news production.

2.5.1 Prior to investigative reporting: **neican** *and the intelligence gatherer*

Before investigative journalism became an individual type of journalism in the 1990s, this form of reporting/news production had already existed in the Chinese political system since 1951 (Young, 2013). Called *neican*, it had different translations, for instance, "internal reference" (Repnikova, 2017), "internal report or news for consideration" (Young, 2013), "internal reporting" (Grant, 1988), and was very similar to what we called investigative reporting today in that it was done by journalists who reported on negative aspects in society under the governance of the Party (Grant, 1988). However, *neican* was only circulated among the political cadre, instead of being published in an open and public outlet (CNCTST, 2018). Citizens could not access such reporting. The production of *neican* was done mainly under the auspices of the Xinhua News Agency, and many reporters from the Xinhua News Agency were encouraged to write *neican* in the last century (Young, 2013). The purpose of *neican* was to provide information for political actors with which to make decisions and evaluate policy implementations (Grant, 1988; Young, 2013). This form of publication filled the needs of political actors, who needed to know how policies were being carried out at the local level (Young, 2013). Hence, Grant (1988:53) described the journalists working on *neican* as "intelligence gatherers" who collected the information officials needed nationwide. These journalists kept "a low profile" and worked for separate editorial teams, according to Young (2013:69).

Neican publications were not open publications for citizens to consume, but they had the basic characteristics of investigative reporting. Political actors used these publications as references for policy making. Since these publications were not

available to the public, criticisms of policies and descriptions of official misconduct never became known by citizens. In essence, Party leaders privatized investigative reporting as an internal instrument with which to evaluate their governance and the public.

With the advent of media reform, *neican* publications partly transformed into open publications in 1985 in that they became available by subscription. *Neican* publications were categorized, according to the confidentiality of the contents, into "*xiao can kao*" and "*da can kao*" (Young, 2013). "*Xiao can kao* (*small reference*)" is "c*an kao xiao xi* (*reference news*)" today and has provided international news to its subscribers since 1985. Sponsored by the Xinhua News Agency, *can kao xiao xi* has had the biggest circulation among Chinese daily newspapers since the 1970s[19]. "*Da can kao* (*big reference*)" can only be accessed by political leaders due to its high degree of confidentiality (Young, 2013).

Prior to the emergence of investigative journalism in the 1990s, investigative reporting was not widely known to the public. Namely, *neican* was not news they could access. The Party controlled who could investigate negative news tightly because the primary task during this historical period was to maintain social stability (Grant, 1988). However, the Party gradually realized the importance of knowing how local governance was practiced and how the public perceived their governance, thus laying the foundation for the emergence of investigative journalism in China.

[19] Available at: https://baike.baidu.com/item/%E5%8F%82%E8%80%83%E6%B6%88%E6%81%AF?fromtitle=%E5%B0%8F%E5%8F%82%E8%80%83&fromid=11173308 (accessed on 27th April 2020)

2.5.2 The emergence: watchdog journalism and the Party's encouragement

In the 1990s, the concept of investigative journalism officially appeared. Investigative journalism was legitimized due to three factors: growing political tensions within the Party, increasing social conflicts, and corruption among journalists (Zhao, 2000). First, internal conflicts among the Party's power holders with regards to the implementation of economic reforms facilitated the emergence of investigative journalism (Zhao, 2000). Investigative reporting was seen as a tool for exposing the faults and wrongdoings of political opponents. Second, along with the ongoing economic reforms in 1978, more social problems were exposed due to the incongruities between capitalist market factors and the socialist political system (Zhao, 2000). The Party leaders realized that it would be a good strategy to begin circulating some of the critical reporting, as seen above, in order to encourage the public to supervise the conduct of officials (Chen, 2017; Repnikova, 2017). In doing so, the Party leaders were able to "reassert control over an unruly and dysfunctional bureaucracy and expose elements of bureaucratic capitalism that had become so ruthless that they threatened the very existence of the bureaucracy itself" (Zhao, 2000:580). Third, journalists' corruption was eroding journalistic practices at that time (Zhao, 1998). Journalists took bribes from companies and officials, endangering the objectivity of their reporting (Hassid, 2016). Therefore, due to these reasons, "watchdog journalism" appeared in China during the late 1980s and into the 1990s.

The first piece of investigative reporting appeared in the form of a television program. CCTV's (China Central Television's) *Focus* (*jiaodian fangtan*) became "the

country's leading watchdog program" when it was launched in 1994 (Zhao, 2000: 581). It aimed to report on social ills and inequalities (De Burgh, 2003). *News Probes* (*xinwen diaocha*) was another TV program launched by CCTV in 1996 that also took a more critical stance when covering events. Both TV programs received encouragement from Chinese political leaders to expose corruption, crime, violence and misconduct (Tong and Sparks, 2009).

Thus, at this stage, investigative journalism relied partly on the internal conflicts among Party power-holders to survive. It was encouraged to help eradicate dissent and balance the power between right and left (Zhao, 1998). Investigative journalism did not experience many bans and restrictions, but the role it played still only had a weak connection with the public. Investigative journalism was still serving the political leadership.

2.5.3 The peak: investigative journalism and **yu lun jian du** *(public opinion supervision)*

As reviewed in the last two sections, investigative reporting in China emerged at a unique time socially, politically and economically. Although investigative reporting was used initially as a political tool by the Party to enhance its governance, criticism of those in political power walked into public sight step-by-step. From 2003 to 2013, Chinese investigative journalism experienced an unprecedented boom. Known as the "golden 10 years" of Chinese journalism, a large amount of critical reporting appeared (Wang, 2016). This reporting benefited from what was being promoted by the Party —— "*yulun jiandu* (public opinion supervision) or *meiti jiandu* (media

supervision)" —— as it provided a distinct role for investigative journalism (Repnikova, 2017).

First appearing in the late 1980s, *yulun jiandu* was mentioned in the *Report to the 13th Party Congress* as a responsibility of the media endorsed by the Party (Chen, 2017: 624). This media practice was initiated post-1992 by the CPD (Zhao and Wusan, 2007:307). Zhao and Wusan (2007:300) state simply that *yulun jiandu* is a "prevailing definition that connotes the use of critical media reports to supervise government officials". Zhao and Wusan (2007) also note that the definition of *yulun jiandu* was not provided in a clear manner. In addition, different scholars translated this term in different ways, for instance, as public scrutiny (De Burgh, 2003), supervision by public opinion (Chen, 2017), and public opinion monitoring reporting (Tong and Sparks, 2009). Repnikova (2017:51) found that these translations emphasized different components of this concept, such as in *meiti jiandu* (media supervision), *shehui jiandu* (society supervision) and *qunzhong jiandu* (mass supervision), but all had the same meaning.

Here, I will use the meaning and translation commonly adopted in the literature. *Yulun jiandu* (public opinion supervision) points out that the media should cover public opinion in their reporting in such a manner as to oversee the conduct of the officials at different administrative levels. Public opinion was not only critical but also helpful and constructive in terms of making changes in policy (Huang, 2011; Repnikova, 2017; Svensson, 2012; Cheung, 2007; Chen, 2017). *Yulun jiandu* (public opinion supervision) was a great and crucial step in the Party's governance and

Chinese political system since propaganda ceased to be the sole function of the media. The opinions of the public were now valued by the Party. The public began to be taken into consideration when journalists carried out investigations. Topics related to public interests were frequently reported on at this stage (Zhao and Wusan, 2007).

According to current studies (Huang, 2011; Chen, 2017; Cheung, 2007), *yulun jiandu* was a political instrument to achieve the Party's dominance over its officials and combat the corruption and bureaucratism inside the Party despite the fact that the media was revealing extensive social problems continuously nationwide. The landmark reporting on Sun Zhigang's death in 2003 signifies the peak of Chinese media freedom. Sun Zhigang, who graduated from a design university, was beaten to death in a detention centre in Guangzhou after failing to produce his residency permit when policemen asked him to do so, as reported by the *Southern Metropolis Daily* (Cheung, 2007). This news event received a great deal of attention from the public online and offline. According to Zhao and Wusan (2007:313), "media reporting amplified legal opinion arguing against the unconstitutional and discriminatory nature of the detention policy." In the same year, Premier Wen Jiabao announced that the related custody system would be abolished. This event not only represented a positive step forward in the Chinese legislative system in the sense that an evil law was abolished (Cheung, 2007) but also signified that public opinion supervision was being practiced well through the media's reporting.

This peak time for Chinese investigative journalism was not only manifested by the abundant negative reporting but also through the rich range of topics and their

growing relevance to different segments of the public. Tong (2011) suggests that environmental reporting started to become salient during this time period. The popularization of environmental topics in reporting occurred in parallel to the national policy promoting sustainable development created during Hu Jintao's presidency. Moreover, Tong finds (2011) that grassroots groups' struggles to enact democratic elections in villages gradually became a popular topic of investigative reporting.

Dahe Daily, a market-oriented newspaper based in Henan, produced many in-depth investigative reporting during the golden years of Chinese journalism. For example, it covered the Wanzhou riot in Chongqing in 2004, which was a large-scale violent collective action triggered by two people quarrelling in the street (Tong, 2011). In 2007, the *Caijing Weekly*, founded in 1998 in Beijing, published a report, "Who's Luneng?", exposing the privatization of a national-owned property. In the following year, the *Oriental Morning Post*, based in Shanghai and suspended in 2017, scooped a milk powder incident in 2008, in which 14 babies were diagnosed with kidney damage after drinking Sanlu milk powder (deLisle, Goldsten and Yang, 2016). Subsequently, more than 30,000 babies in China received medical treatment. In 2010, Wang Keqin, regarded as "China's pioneering muckraking reporter", a former investigative journalist for the *China Economic Times*, exposed a vaccine scandal in Shanxi that had been covered up by the provincial disease control and prevention centre.

Many aspects of social life were covered by investigative journalism between 2003 and 2013, such as healthcare, resident housing and labourer's rights. This trend

led the local media in different regions to examine what had been reported by other media. Since internet use increased during this period, netizens' heated discussions online urged follow-up investigations by mainstream media (Tang and Sampson, 2012). Major metropolitan newspapers started to treat the internet as a source for topics (Tong and Sparks, 2009). The massive exposure of social problems by the media forced the government to take action (Wang, 2016). Public issues became the core of the news agenda. On the one hand, this scenario benefitted from the implementation of *yulun jiandu*. On the other hand, the market-oriented newspapers were encouraged to cover these sorts of issues due to the media reform (Stockmann, 2013). These newspapers, that is, both metropolitan and local papers, increased their revenues through reporting critical news involving hard facts about officials in order to attract audiences (Tong and Sparks, 2009). However, as investigative reporting reached its peak, the Party began to tighten its control over investigations into negative events.

2.5.4 The recession: political constraints and journalistic resistance

The initial sign of investigative journalism's decline can be dated back to 2008, the year the Olympic Games were held in Beijing. Leading up to this event, the CPD requested that critical reporting be kept to a limited number. In subsequent years, many in-depth reporting units in big newspaper organizations were downsized (Wang, 2016). Since 2011, investigative reports have been found less and less in China. Professional teams and groups have been dismissed. Programs were cut back, then

banned. The numbers of excellent investigative journalists leaving the field grew exponentially.

Investigative journalism is doomed to decline in China (Tong, 2011). Firstly, "investigative journalism is suspected of being liberalist"; hence, the Party has to maintain its control over this form of journalism (Tong, 2011:52). This liberalist element is closely associated with the journalistic professionalism that journalists hoped to push to a level that would allow them to compete with US journalism (Chan, Pan and Lee, 2003). A transition in the Party's ruling principle also occurred, and it became "the correction of individual mistakes for the construction of a harmonious society" (Tong, 2011:53). Massive critical and negative reporting was not conducive to facilitating a harmonious society.

Since 2013, political constraints and journalistic resistance have become two key phrases characterizing investigative journalism in China. Numerous studies have explored how the Party-state has confined and censored investigative journalism (De Burgh, 2003; Tong, 2015c; Wang, 2016; Wang and Lee, 2014). Generally, there are two sets of constraints, each of which is practiced in three steps. The two sets of constraints refer to the propaganda department's interruptions in journalistic reporting activities in the field (Tong, 2015c; Xu, 2015) and the requirement that journalists practice self-censorship in news writing (Wang, 2016; Shao, 2018). The three steps refer to the possible times at which such constraints could be imposed: before reporting (making a story proposal in an editorial meeting), during ongoing reporting, and after publication (Repnikova, 2017; Bei, 2013; Hassid, 2016; Svensson, 2012).

According to Tong (2019: 82), President Xi made a speech in 2016 that "claiming the news media owned by the party and government should consider its 'surname' to be the party (*meiti xingdang*), ie. news media should consider itself so intimately linked to the party." However, Repnikova (2017) suggests that the reporting space is still negotiable. Corresponding to the constraints on journalistic activities and news writing, journalists have developed a series of strategies in order to resist and have their reporting published. Taking advantage of internet-based platforms, some investigative journalists have opened public accounts on social media to increase their impact. For instance, Chu Zhaoxin, an investigative journalist who is famous for reporting on the Wang Lijun event[20], and Shi Feike, who worked for many different media organizations as a journalist and editor before entering the legal profession and exposed numerous incidents relating to social injustice and power abuse, were among the first media professionals to open public accounts on social media to publish their reports and commentaries on political and social affairs in China.

2.5.5 Investigative journalists and today: public demands on journalism

In the above section, I discussed how the Party-state currently controls and censors investigative reporting. According to scholars, journalists' resistance to authoritarian power is improvised (Pan, 2000; Repnikova, 2017). This improvised struggle is mainly the result of the "intangibility of the Party's power" (O'Brien, 2006).

[20] Wang Lijun was a police chief and vice mayor in Chongqing province. During his investigation of the murder of a British businessman, Wang was involved in a political scandal and fled to the US embassy in Chongqing. He was convicted of treason in 2012.

However, based on what I suggested in Chapter One, as journalists have already adapted to the Party's control, these so-called improvised practices used to combat the Party are no longer "improvised". In other words, journalistic resistance to the propaganda department is the "new normal (*xin chang tai*)". Namely, journalists' resistant activities are now part of their daily practices. Next, I will discuss how the digital -media-empowered public, situated within this "new normal", is an important non-state challenger filling the gap in investigative journalism.

Based on survey data provided by Zhang and Cao (2017), the total number of investigative journalists in China in December 2017 was 175. Six years ago, this number was reduced to 159. Currently, half of these journalists are no longer working in the media industry. Thirty media organizations have cut their investigative reporting departments. As most investigative journalists are based in big cities, for instance, Beijing (41%), Guangzhou (8%), Wuhan (6.1%), Zhengzhou (4.9%), Shanghai (4.9%) and Chongqing (4.9%), the in-depth reporting departments in provincial news organizations have been downsized more extensively because investigative journalism is an expensive type of journalism (Tong and Sparks, 2009). Journalists who worked in small cities and remote areas have limited social resources from whom to obtain information, and it is hard for them to afford to live in big cities. So, many of these journalists have left the field.

The departure of investigative journalists damages the diversity of reporting. With shortage of staff, the reporting is also not as in-depth because journalists cannot interview key individuals within a short time span. In order to maintain investigative

reporting departments, many news organizations have tried to recruit new blood. For instance, *The Paper* (*peng pai*), an online mainstream news website, introduced a series of investigative reporting channels in 2014; the *Red Star News* (*hong xing xin wen*), owned by *Chengdu Shang Bao*, recruited investigative journalists with 200,000-yuan annual salaries in 2017; and the *Beijing News* (*xin jing bao*) announced that it would invest at least 2 billion yuan in a search for extraordinary journalists (Zhang and Cao, 2017).

According to the existing literature, the political control of investigative journalism is the foremost reason for its depressed state (Tong, 2011; Li and Sparks, 2016). Political power has shaped the ebbs and flows of Chinese investigative journalism since its inception (Repnikova, 2017). As the Chinese journalism system is incorporated into the political structure, it has become an institutionalized fact that journalism is subjected to the lead of the Party. Furthermore, the public and netizens both align with journalists (Wang, 2016) and challenge the authority of investigative journalism.

2.6 Conclusion

This chapter has provided a contextual background for my research and demonstrates the complicity of the media system in China. Using the media reform of 1978 as the departure for my review of the literature, I discussed how the media landscape has changed since the end of the last century and how investigative journalism took shape against this backdrop. I noted that a growing body of literature argued that while the freedom of the press brought by media reform was unprecedented, it is undeniable

that the Party still maintains its control over all forms of media and journalism in China (Repnikova, 2017; Tong, 2011; Lin, 2010; Pan and Chan, 2003). These academic works largely adopted a political economy approach to examine the relation between the Party and media, which set the academic tradition of Chinese journalism and media studies. Early Chinese scholars borrowed the interpretations of the political economy of media from western researchers (McChesney, 2000; Curran and Park, 2000). As noted by McChesney (2000: 110), we can understand this approach with two dimensions. One dimension is how ownership, revenue and political policy influence media production; another dimension concerns how economy and politics changes social structure and relation. In the context of China, political economy is widely used to analyse the media system and its transition after 1980. Lee (2001:87) argued that "'political' political economy is a theory for analysing the authoritarian media, whereas the 'economic' political economy is a theory for analysing the liberal-capitalist democratic media". In China, the media system is neither liberal nor authoritarian, which shows the possibility that both types of media systems could coexist in a transitional system (Lee, 2011:87). This theoretical approach received profound attention from scholars in the early days of media studies. It highlights the characteristics of Chinese media system in transition when the marketization is introduced into a system symbolized as with its propaganda role (He, 2000; Zhao, 1998). However, while the growing power of digital media entered this arena, the media system in China is, once again, complicated.

Based on the arguments made by previous studies, I argued that: 1) the media system in China should be treated as a dynamic system while emphasizing the digital transition occurring today; 2) political constraints on the media and journalism practices are more observable when using a macro-level analysis; and 3) from the perspective of individuals and organizations, investigative journalism, as well as journalism, have experienced disruptions due to the public's use of digital technologies.

I also noted that there are many contradictory aspects regarding how to understand journalism as a discipline and industry in China. Researchers argue that Chinese media and journalism studies are changing constantly (Latham, 2009; Zhao, 2008; Stockmann, 2013), whereas most academic works still concentrate on the market and the political power of the Party and public (Wang and Sparks, 2019a; Li and Sparks, 2016). Such contradictory claims result from the complexities of the indigenous phenomena that I introduced in this chapter, and, more importantly, the absence of criticism when theories are applied to explain practices, which is a difficult conundrum that is yet to be solved.

Scholars who have analysed the theoretical and methodological applications of the published research on Chinese journalism and the media (Zhou, 2006; Wang and Lee, 2014) suggested that more spaces need to be explored in this area by improving critical engagement with theories. As a discipline is grounded and developed on existing theories, researchers have to be cautious about the misinterpreted or overlooked aspects contained in existing studies, as highlighted by Collins and

Stockton (2018). I reviewed information that indicates that media and journalism studies today are still likely to use pioneering works examining the transitions in the economic and political powers within an institutionalized media system (Zhao, 1998, 2000; Zhou, 2000; Lee, 2003). This chapter has provided a general background, and I now intend to concentrate on examining nuanced changes in investigative journalism against this background. Namely, while centralized control over journalistic practices by the Party is undeniable, such coercive power is an overarching force shaping the development of journalism in a macro sense. What has not been discussed explicitly is what shapes the practices of investigative journalism at a micro level. More significantly, what are the theoretical implications if we observe, and theorize on, the presence of investigative journalism in China at a micro level? In the next chapter, I explain the theoretical framework that I have applied to answer such questions.

Chapter Three: Literature Review

3.1 Introduction

This chapter revisits key debates in the studies of gatekeeping. I treat gatekeeping as news selection that involves multiple variables and processes. With digital media inviting challenges to journalism, the extant literature has argued that gatekeeping is outdated with regard to explaining digital journalism (e.g. Bruns, 2018; Pearson and Kosicki, 2017). Nevertheless, although western academics argue about the extent to which the media landscape's fragmentation and disruption is caused by digital media, I suggest that the existing research may be improved through investigating how an old concept—gatekeeping—may be re-theorised against the digital backdrop. More specifically, how do existing debates in journalism studies regarding news selection, for example news values and verification, contribute to theorising the notion of gatekeeping? Furthermore, how can the theoretical capacity of gatekeeping be expanded through introducing digital-based evidence?

This chapter will initially introduce how news production is reviewed in the context of media sociology. Secondly, I will analyze the notion of gatekeeping, which emphasises how news selection is subjected to variables across different social levels. In this section, I discuss gatekeeping's fundamental practices, including how journalists treat news sources, identify newsworthiness and verify facts.

3.2 The sociological roots of news making

Early scholarship engaged extensively with the issue of how news is selected and processed by professional journalists, laying the foundation of the sociology of news

making (White, 1950; Breed, 1955; Gans, 1979; Reese and Ballinger, 2001; Park, 1940; Schudson, 1989). These studies continued exploring the question of what the news is, as well as how news production relates to our understandings of reality. Sociological inquiry into news production incorporates wide-ranging topics associated with journalists' practices within different social and cultural contexts, emphasizing the dynamic relationships between individual journalists, news organizations and institutional settings of media systems. Pioneering academics' research into media sociology suggested that journalists are not the only group making decisions about what news can be reported, with numerous social actors able to influence how the news manifests in the way it does (Gans, 1979; Berkowitz, 1989). In this scenario, influencers across various social levels affect journalistic practices, for example, the control of news organizations (White, 1950), newsroom culture (Steensen, 2018), the nature of media systems (Hallin and Mancini, 2004), as well as the journalistic community's ideological position (Berkowitz, 1997). As Shoemaker and Reese (2014:11) argued, the reason for investigating the nature of news production among these levels is to consider "the immediate actions of specific individuals, and the more organized and historically situated actions of larger collections of people." Rather than perceiving news as a product made by journalists, media sociologists have also investigated how journalists build up connections and associations with the social actors involved in their activities. As advanced technologies empower the public's access to a variety of news products, the social relationships between journalists and the people who consume the news become tighter.

By reviewing the earlier sociological studies of news production, I identified that researchers particularly highlighted the constraints on journalists' practices stemming from organisational and routine aspects (White, 1950; Breed, 1955; Fishman, 1980). As Fishman's (1980) ethnographic study showed, the journalists-sources relationship is bureaucratically constructed, because journalists' practices of sourcing news is highly reliant upon the provision of information by governmental agencies. This process forms a stable beat between journalists and their sources-providers. Moreover, researchers such as Breed (1955) investigated how news organisations' policies and regulations enhance journalists' understanding of their occupation. Such organisational control shapes journalists' perceptions of how interviews should be carried out and what facts should be selected for verification, as they work at a distance from the frontline.

Coming into the 21st century, increasing attention has been focused on investigating how journalists' practices have benefitted from cutting-edge media technology, and how the technology has empowered structural and routine changes within the newsroom that constrain journalists' individual activities (Cottle, 2000a; Pavlik, 2000). Subsequently, debates based on the experience of western societies have been rapidly enriched, resulting in studies of media sociology diverging in two directions.

One stream of academic voices has argued that the social production of news is by the concept of news as a product created through the negotiation between various social actors. Specifically, whilst technological improvements help journalists

establish new relationships and reach out widely and freely to other social groups, such advanced technology may also hinder journalists' authority in news production, as well as their professional interpretations of news events (Carlson, 2009; Schudson and Anderson, 2009). As suggested by Boczkowski (2005), what characterizes news production in the digital age is media technology and other social actors' mutually-shaping relationship. His argument further strengthens the notion that nobody is able to exert decisive influence over the transformation of the media and journalism, with journalists continuing to provide the public with authoritative information (Boczkowski, 2015). In this relationship, journalists are situated at the nexus of society, technology and organization, and channel ideas from a variety of sources. As journalists work closely with their sources, public relations, political officials, non-governmental organisations, activists and news consumers in a networked environment (Meraz and Papacharissi, 2013), they also seek to balance these actors' interests. At the centre of this networked environment, journalists are the principal object receiving pressure from various social levels, with their presentation of information in the media being a negotiated result between powers both internal and external to the news organizations.

The second stream of voices argues that journalism is not the only social community facing challenges from technological developments, with further research necessary into how the behavior and practices of social actors are digitally empowered, which indirectly shapes journalists' attitudes and decisions in news making (Anderson, 2016; Gillmor, 2006). Despite certain scholars (Matheson and

Wahl-Jorgensen, 2020) investigating how news content is produced and disseminated online by non-professional producers in a positive manner, a substantial amount of literature demonstrates that content from non-professional media outlets, for instance citizen journalism, participatory journalism, social media opinion leaders and internet celebrities, is important today in particular regions of the world (for example China), and is more influential to the public (Singer, 2014). As the public is constantly a significant component of news production, their practices regarding consumption, reposting and commenting help shape the rules and guidelines within the newsroom, as well as the conduct of individual journalists. Evidence from Waddell's (2018) research into US news websites shows that when a news item is followed by more negative comments, the news audience is likely to perceive the credibility and importance of the news as low, and this is seen as an influential factor for journalists and editors in their construction of news values during their future reporting. Furthermore, the important role of news consumers can be observed in the more recent research into newsworthiness by Harcup and O'Neill (2017), including the shareability and audio-visual value of news as two criteria for measuring newsworthiness for journalists, which has been inspired by the practices of social media users.

3.3 Journalistic gatekeeping

It is no exaggeration to suggest that gatekeeping is one of journalism studies' foremost inclusive theories. As gatekeeping may be understood variously as the role of journalists' perception, a process of news selection, a form of organisational

control, a set of organisational routines, or a series of editorial decisions, gatekeeping theory may be approached in a number of ways (Bruns, 2018; Vos and Thomas, 2019; Vos and Finneman, 2017; Linder, 2017; Heinderyckx, 2015; Yu, 2011). How to define gatekeeping within the discipline of journalism depends to a considerable extent on the social, cultural, political and geographical context. Through reviewing pioneering works by Breed (1955) and White (1950), it can be seen that gatekeeping was not introduced specifically with regards to its theoretical implications, rather it was proposed on the basis of the empirical experience of journalists working for news organizations across the world.

3.3.1 Theorizing gatekeeping or expanding gatekeeping

Gatekeeping was initially introduced into social sciences as a loosely-defined concept. It was originally applied to understanding individual behaviour, as well as the psychological reasons that drive individuals' behaviour (Burnes and Cooke, 2013). Lewin (1947) used "gate" as a metaphorical expression to explain how a decision was made, and what occurred at the "gate" while a particular decision was being made. Such a decision concerns how a field is permitted to be entered, or why and what is rejected at the "gate" at an individual level. Lewin (1947:145) explained that "gate sections are governed either by impartial rules or by gatekeeper […] and an individual or group is 'in power' for making the decision between 'in' or 'out'".

As gatekeeping is introduced into media sociology, scholars keep developing a more contextualized understanding of gatekeeping to make sense of the relationships between media practitioners and other social actors (Tandoc, 2015; Tandoc, 2018;

Hellmueller and Li, 2015). Here, I choose the phrase “media practitioners” over “media professionals”, because the thread of existing literature shows that gatekeeping has become a contested notion in the internet age, according to my observations. On the one hand, scholars attempt to develop gatekeeping into an inclusive concept by fitting it into a digital context (Bro and Wallberg, 2014; Tandoc and Vos, 2016); on the other hand, as the conceptual capacity and competence of gatekeeping improved, scholars’ concern (Tandoc, 2018; Vos and Finneman, 2017) shifted to another side —how gatekeeping validates its conceptual role (see 3.3.3) — under the circumstance that journalism turns out to be a hybrid and networked field (Chadwick, 2017; Russell, 2017; Anderson, 2017).

By re-visiting gatekeeping from Lewin’s (1947) interpretations, scholars identify that gatekeeping is crossed over with Bourdieu’s field theory, as it is imported into journalism and media studies (Benson, 2006; Tandoc, 2018; Welbers and Opgenhaffen, 2018). For instance, Benson (2006:190) argues that “fields are arenas of struggle in which individuals and organizations compete, unconsciously and consciously, to valorize those forms of capital which they possess”. Whilst journalism is identified as a field where relations, conflicts and interactions among various forces take place on different levels (Shoemaker and Reese, 2009), journalists practice their role of gatekeeping in this field and have the authority to process information into news. The differences between how Bourdieu and Lewin engage in field theory (Tandoc, 2015) is that while Bourdieu emphasized the relationship between the field

in the past and in the present, Lewin (1947) underlined the contextualized situation as the background to making sense of the function of the "gate".

Generally, gatekeeping is explained as how information is transmitted, communicated and delivered among societies by news workers, and how the processed information, namely news, affects people's knowledge concerning reality (White, 1950; Breed, 1955). Inspired by Lewin (1947), Shoemaker (1991) subsequently developed this concept into a multi-level theory for addressing the connection between newsmakers and the environment within which they live in. While newsmakers process information, their decision-making processes concerning what is deemed newsworthy is subject to the newsmakers' personal characteristics and experience, the culture of the news organisations, as well as the ideology of the social system (Shoemaker, 1991). The deepest value in her interpretation of gatekeeping is the identification of the complexity of news production being a consequence of insufficient clarification concerning the reason, which leads to various decisions. Subsequently, Shoemaker categorised these influential factors into various levels, theorising gatekeeping as a network of concepts within a hierarchical model. Abundant follow-up research has adopted the label of "gatekeeping" to investigate news production and expand the scope of discussion.

To clarify, in this thesis, I consider gatekeeping incorporates a substantial number of debates concerning how news comes into being, as well as the factors that might affect journalists in reaching decisions and judgements regarding what the news should be (Shoemaker and Reese, 2014). As Reese and Shoemaker (2016) argued, in

order to understand how news is produced, it is significant to untangle the intricate relationship between journalism and social structures, resources, conventions and all the other "taken-for-granted" cultures in which journalism resides. Such relationships, powerfully influencing journalistic practices of reality construction, were profoundly scrutinized at the macro-, meso- and micro-levels of analysis within the hierarchical model (Shoemaker and Reese, 2014). This model helps reveal the complexity of news production's complexity and the determination of how these variables intertwine with each other. Fundamentally, as initially proposed by scholars (Reese, 2001; Reese and Shoemaker, 2016), this hierarchical model does not aim to capture news production's characteristics at each analytical level. Rather, it offers a comprehensive framework for understanding the argument that news is a socially constructed reality, in addition to providing a theoretical guide for future research.

Sociological studies of news production cover a wide range of domains and levels of analysis, shedding light on the dynamic and ongoing relationships between news producers and the social environment which news makers inhabit. Both streams demonstrate that news is not merely a journalistic construction of reality. Journalists' interpretations of reality have not developed out of a personal stance and willingness. While journalists are typically mindful of their organization's economic goal, audience preferences and the public interest, they should remain vigilant against those actors who might undermine their works' authority. The review above has broadly introduced the topics and areas that sociological studies touch upon. The following section will introduce the key practices that journalists use to process news in respect

of o two dimensions. This section will review how these news-making practices are performed by journalists in various social levels. Following this, I will introduce, procedurally, how journalists engage with sources, and construct the values of news and fact-checking.

3.3.2 Levels of analysis

A growing body of literature under the gatekeeping framework analyses how journalists process raw information into news, while being constrained or facilitated by different social actors. As suggested by scholars (Shoemaker and Reese, 2014; Shoemaker, 1991; Shoemaker et al., 2010; Reese and Shoemaker, 2016) have observed, gatekeeping is not only a process of information selection. More significantly, it reflects journalists' perception of what may become news. In this scenario, journalists' conceptualization of news is not always consistent with their practices, because of the variance of journalists' individual characteristics, role perception, organisational rules, workflow and the social system (Shoemaker, 1991). Accordingly, in this section I will review how gatekeeping is interpreted at different levels of the social system.

According to the hierarchical model of influence, what is located at the centre are journalists' individual characteristics, and these shed light on how their demographic nature and individual experience shape their practices (Shoemaker and Reese, 2014). Further research has adopted an individual level of analysis for exploring the role perception of journalists (Tandoc, Hellmueller and Vos, 2013). On the one hand, some of the existing literature exploring various cultural contexts has

evidenced the variance among journalistic perceptions of their role and function, thus potentially resulting in different models of journalism, such as watchdog journalism and beat journalism (O' Sullivan and Heinonen, 2008; Skovsgaard et al., 2013). On the other hand, Hassid (2016) has argued that in the Chinese context, given that journalists consider themselves to play a fundamental role, it is more likely that journalists will pursue greater autonomy in their reporting practices. This shows how individual characteristics and personal attitudes towards their profession may shape journalists' activities.

The routine level of analysis emphasises how news production's workflow procedurally affects what news might look like (Reese and Shoemaker 2016). One aspect of this level of analysis can be understood as the bureaucratic impact on news production (Soloski, 1989). A news organisation's workflow is established as a long-term operation, being a significant part of newsroom culture (Shoemaker and Reese, 2014). The established patterns and routines formed in this process force incoming journalists to align themselves with such a scenario, which might prove to be both a constraint (White, 1955) and an inspiration (Shoemaker et al., 2001). A second aspect is that in a positive sense, routine plays a vital role in assisting journalists with identifying newsworthiness, as evidenced by a case study of US political news (Shoemaker et al., 2001). Moreover, evidence from digital journalism illustrates how a news routine is also conducive to forming a robust network among journalists employed by the same news organisation, thus potentially enhancing the manner in

which journalists perceive their role as disseminators (Tandoc, Hellmueller and Vos, 2013).

Given that the news routine is an aspect of the organisational setting, an organizational level of analysis incorporates a broad range of elements (Sigelman, 1973). As mediators between routine and institution, influential factors of news organisations include ownership, audience, market orientation and platform (Shoemaker and Reese, 2014). Besides the advent of sophisticated media technologies, organisational effects have combined strongly with other factors to shape news-making. One of the most evident changes within news organisations has been the introduction of media convergence (Erdal, 2007; Dwyer, 2010). This strategy has not just sped up news production in a way that has increased market competitiveness (Le Cam and Domingo, 2015)— potentially overlooking the quality of news—it has also reformulated the workflow with different models (such as integration and cross-media), aiming to save on the cost of news production (Avilés and Carvajal, 2008). Alongside these internal changes, Reese and Shoemaker (2016) suggested that what counts as a news organisation is more challenging to address specifically, given that alternative forms of journalism work content appear to be challenging journalism's boundaries, for example Wikileaks, news aggregators and data journalism (Coddington, 2015; Wahl-Jorgensen, 2014).

In a networked media environment, news selection's organisational characteristics cannot be discussed separately from the institutional structure within which media organisations reside. Similarly, the institutional level is concerned with

how journalism's professional boundaries are constructed and maintained (Lowrey, 2015), particularly during the information age, although this emphasis is underpinned by the broader scope of how economic stature and the political agenda constrain journalists' professional judgements of news beyond the organisational factors (Shoemaker and Vos, 2009). Indeed, this has been seen as a longstanding tradition, ever since journalism emerged as a profession (Vos and Finneman, 2017). In the western context, the trend of media groups forming conglomerations, enhances controls by the elite over media content and its dissemination (Tiffen, 2015). Despite journalists, particularly watchdog journalists, striving to provide high-quality news, it is inevitable that they cover content which audiences are interested in, because this increases economic gains (Abdenour and Riffe, 2019).

The final aspect of the macro-level is the social system. At the social system level, there is a concern with how social institutions are structured and interact, and what the cultural meanings, values and assumptions are that remain embedded in such relations (Shoemaker and Reese 2014). This level of analysis considers not just the deep-rooted connections between cultural and social formations from an ideological position, it also perceives the aggregated influence of individual, routine, organisation and institution as a cultural result (Shoemaker and Vos, 2009). For example, as journalism enters an age of globalisation, many scholars have commented that, while globalisation facilitates the global sharing of information, it also facilitates distributing power from countries that hold greater capital and resources compared with informationally disadvantaged countries (Castells, 2008).

3.3.3 What's wrong with gatekeeping?

Steensen and Ahva (2015) argue that journalism in the field is developing so rapidly that it is difficult to maintain the academic inquiry necessary to keep abreast of journalism theories. Digital media urges scholars to re-examine the transition in both the academic and journalism fields (Robinson, Lewis and Carlson, 2019). Whereas researchers have introduced original knowledge on the basis of particular geographical contexts as a means of updating the gatekeeping framework (Vos and Thomas, 2019), there is a substantial amount of work questioning gatekeeping theory in explaining the contemporary digital presence (Bro and Wallberg, 2014; Bruns, 2018). Such critical voices have a twofold implication concerning improving approaches to adapting gatekeeping within a dynamic development of journalistic practices.

First, gatekeeping theory's various interpretations and applications have largely been investigated within the context of anglophone culture. This restricts the scope of how to understand journalists' news production practices and functions within non-western environments. In order words, the extant literature on gatekeeping analyzes evidence primarily from the west, as well as from the identified media systems. Besides these media systems that we are currently aware of (Hallin and Mancini, 2017), it remains unclear whether gatekeeping can be legitimised by the empirical evidence from hybrid media systems, or a more complex media ecosystem (Anderson, 2016). The reason we need to be aware of this is that as "gatekeeping" is combined with a hierarchical level of analysis (Shoemaker, 1991), media and

journalistic practices at the macro level are subject to the media system's institutional characteristics. Even in those countries adhering to a democratic political system, nuanced divergences remain with regard to how media and journalism sectors perform in societies (Voltmer, 2012). Accordingly, in my research, I attempt to investigate how the notion of gatekeeping is theorised and practiced within a non-western context.

Second, gatekeeping is rooted in the field of media sociology (Shoemaker and Vos, 2009). This deepens the meaning of gatekeeping in a way that assumes that newsmakers, namely journalists, must engage sociologically in complex and intangible relationships with social actors. However, in the digital age, this situation has been challenged in an unprecedented way by the alternative media presence, for example citizen journalism, public opinion leaders, media activists and non-profit media organisations (Bruns, 2018; Yu, 2011; Bro and Wallberg, 2014; Linder, 2017; Pearson and Kosicki, 2017; Wallace, 2018). With journalists and news organisations being vulnerable to commercial and propagandistic forces, digitally empowered social actors are once more complicating journalists' gatekeeping role (McNair, 2018; Tong, 2019), in addition to the scholarly understanding of this concept. Regardless, given that gatekeeping is not clearly defined, debates surrounding this concept have subsequently emerged and these have enriched the academic discourse with more critical enquiries concerning whether gatekeeping continues to be feasible in the contemporary period and how the model of it may be updated (Bruns, 2018; Vos and Thomas, 2019; Tandoc, 2014; Schwalbe, Silcock and Candello, 2015). Thus, the

above review has identified that the critical concerns relating to gatekeeping theory may be classified according to two aspects: how gatekeeping is theorised within a complex media system and how that theorisation fits with contemporary digital inquiries.

3.4 Processing news

The discussion in this section shifts to look at the key processes journalists perform gatekeeping. Referring to Shoemaker and Vos (2009), gatekeeping theory is powerful for its containing a wide range of debates relating to different variables regarding the production of news. I outline three debates to discuss in this part: 1) how journalists approach their sources; 2) how the values of news are constructed and what shapes journalists' decision in this regard; 3) how journalists identify facts through verification. All of these discussions are relevant to how journalists practice gatekeeping, alongside the extent to which journalists can fulfil their role as gatekeepers.

3.4.1 Approaching sources

Extensive studies have focused on exploring the relationship between journalists and their sources (Berkowitz, 2009; Broersma and Graham, 2013; Lewis, Williams and Franklin, 2008; Gans, 1979; Manning, 2000; Moon and Hadley, 2014; Tuchman, 1973). Irrespective of how effectively the tools for news sourcing improved, they are unable to replace the role that journalists performed in sourcing news. The studies treat news sources as the core of journalistic work mainly for two reasons.

First, the information that journalists obtain from sources is not pure information (Albæk, 2011). Identifying the reason why sources approach journalists and how the source-provided information is narrated by sources requires journalists' professional efforts (Manning, 2000; Broersma and Graham, 2013). In other words, the process of gatekeeping has already started while journalists are exposed in the vast pool of information. According to the interpretation from Shoemaker and Reese (2016), gatekeeping is a process more than news selection. Especially in the digital age, sources could actively approach journalists and journalists need to find facts among the large amount of sources-provided information. Manning (2000) notes that it is important for journalists to discern the type of sources and treat them in different ways accordingly. Scholars regard that officials are the major sources through which journalists obtain information and utilise it into news reporting (Tuchman, 1978; Gans, 1979; Schudson, 1989). However, Lewis et al. (2008) discover that journalists show an increasing reliance on amateur sources to obtain information, such as public relations and information subsidies. On this basis, amateur information providers become "professional", with journalists not enjoying much priority regarding obtaining first-hand and exclusive information. As Wihbey observes (2017), journalism is not an occupation generating original knowledge. Journalists need to be conscious of a source's underlying "professional motive" and seek to eliminate it, especially when they are reporting scientific research (Wihbey, 2017). Apart from officials, sources can be scientific expertise and NGOs' press release, which may provide an alternative stance or indeed are contrary to official sources, it does not

mean such sources are automatically reliable (Van Leuven et al., 2013). Albæk (2011) notes the same implications in the science reporting, whereby scientists can cover in greater length if they understand the "media logic", which refers to the way journalists select and process information. Moreover, Davis (2009) argues that politicians can absorb promotional strategies from media professionals during their interaction and communication with them. Ultimately, journalists and politicians have developed a mutual awareness increasingly shared in both fields.

Furthermore, against the digital backdrop, Hermida et al. (2014) contend that the percentage of being sourced from Twitter is rising, while social media users have an increasing awareness of how to gain the attention of journalists. Saridou et al. (2017) suggest that there is less independent reporting in online journalism, due to the advent of social networks. Online journalists use the content from UGC, because it seems easy to access. Moreover, Bouvier (2017) concludes that a distinct feature of online sources-provided contents that social media users, like Twitter users, describe their encounters and experience in a personalized and emotional manner, which is easy for journalists to spot in the vast pool of information. As noted by Russell (2017), the impact of social media sources is far greater than the effect of bureaucratic power on journalists' sources.

Second, economic status, workflow and rules and principles of news organizations may influence journalists' sourcing practices and source selection, for example, if journalists are encouraged to use online sources and have a particular percentage of online sources in a news item (Tong, 2017a; Larsen, 2017; Soloski,

1997). Van Leuven et al. (2013) argued that with a limited budget, some news organizations need to draw on their peers' sources and pre-packaged sources, thus producing "churnalism". Moreover, Boehmer et al. (2017) wrote that non-profit news organizations are more likely to draw on further sources to cover conflict issues, although such sources typically have the same affiliation and share similar interests, whereas for profit news outlets, researchers notice a clear inclination by journalists to tailor their work to cater audience's taste by using a variety of sources, particularly in daily journalism. In quality journalism, Larsen (2017) put out forward that investigative journalists are more likely to access sources based on what they need, as opposed to considering the economic effects that sources might have on their news organizations. However, such practices have altered because of the prevalence of social media. Investigative journalists, meanwhile, usually prioritize the sources which they regularly use in their reporting.

3.4.2 Constructing newsworthiness

What news is and how news becomes what it is are both strongly associated with the values of news (Deuze and Witschge, 2020). As collaborating the hierarchical model of influences with gatekeeping, Shoemaker and Vos (2009: 122) argue once journalists obtain information from sources, the sources-provided information enters to another gate that journalists assess the importance of information. Based on Galtung and Ruge's pioneering research (1965), many scholars have tried to extend the spectrum to conceptualize and define news values, while forms of news are being updated (Brighton and Foy, 2007; Shoemaker, 2006). As O'Neill and Harcup (2009:

162) note, news values is a "slippery concept" and it is difficult to establish a set of unified norms to describe what account as values in news. These debates cover a wide range of topics, for instance, what role that organizational and editorial decisions play in constructing newsworthiness (Clayman and Reisner, 1998; Lester, 1980; Strömbäck, Karlsson, and Hopmann, 2012), how the audience's reaction on social media helps journalists understand newsworthiness (Matheson, 2004; Wendelin, Engelmann and Neubarth, 2017), how news values are interpreted from a linguistic and discursive approach (Bednarek and Caple, 2017), how journalists perform the role of gatekeeping to filter out worthless news (Machin and Niblock, 2006) and also how the criteria of news values may be updated for the digital age (Harcup and O'Neill, 2017).

As investigated in the extant literature (Harcup and O'Neill, 2001; 2017; Machin and Niblock, 2006), the significance of studying newsworthiness derives from two aspects. Firstly, the gap between practitioners and scholars in terms of understanding newsworthiness always exists. For practitioners, identifying newsworthiness is more likely to be considered as a matter of journalistic "instinct", and described by journalists as a natural perception of news (Machin and Niblock, 2006). Journalists' judgements concerning what might be worthy of reporting are based on their professional experience and knowledge (Tuchman, 1973), although scholars have suggested that such experience is much more complicated and cannot be understood as a journalistic instinct (Schultz, 2007; Machin and Niblock, 2006).

Secondly, the context of studying newsworthiness lacks clarity, for example concerning the contrast between constructing newsworthiness in commercial news organizations and in official-led news organizations (Stockmann, 2013), on differences of media platforms and types of news reporting. As suggested in the literature (Abdenour and Riffe, 2019; Ettema and Glasser, 1998), newsworthiness is not a prominent topic in the research into quality journalism or watchdog journalism, because this type of journalism sheds light on reporting what relates to public interests worldwide. Moreover, besides the aspect considered above, a considerable amount of research regarding newsworthiness has been built on Galtung and Ruge's (1965) work, adopting an inductive approach to identifying newsworthiness by sampling the published news. Procedurally, further researchers look at the concept of news values by analysing the news circulated on different types of media platforms, whereas less scholarship has discussed how journalists practice their understanding of newsworthiness in news selection and writing. Some earlier academic works have examined newsworthiness as an outcome of compromises between journalists and editors in the newsroom (Schudson, 1989; Soloski, 1997). However, in the digital era, the process of compromise has been more evident between journalists and their audience. The tension between journalists and editorial decisions regarding what to cover is strengthened by digital media (Tandoc, 2015).

Boczkowski and Mitchelstein (2016: 178) argue that the news gap between the public and journalists in terms of newsworthiness indicates that "journalists have a higher preference for public affairs news than consumers". Enhanced media

technology and the digital presence has widened this gap. Further argued by Boczkowski and Mitchelstein (2016), the audience does not possess a strong awareness of public affairs until their attention is captured by what is massively exposed in online media. Given that the audience is always an important part of news production, how they consume news influences how journalists convey their news stories (Shoemaker and Reese, 2014; Lewis, Holton and Coddington, 2013; Tandoc, 2015). Although it would be too much of a generalization to say that all types of journalists are more likely to source interesting stories in accordance with the preference of the news audience, it is undeniable that audience may be highly engaged in news production regarding the values construction of stories (Bruns, 2018; Groshek and Tandoc, 2017). While journalists receive a news hint, it has become a new "instinct" to think about whether their audience would be interested in that item. As noted by Carlson (2018), the audience's engagement in news production empowered by digital media has directed journalism into an age of "measurable journalism". He writes (2018: 409) that "measurable journalism encapsulates the cultural and material shift to digital platforms capable of providing real-time, individualizable, quantitative data about audience consumption practices." Indeed, this does not mean that digital media has deprived journalists of their gatekeeping role in terms of selecting and telling news stories. Ultimately, journalists' professional judgement still matters. Research from Groshek and Tandoc (2017) shows that the relationship between journalists from traditional news groups and online news consumers is more intricate than simply who takes the lead in covering stories. As discussed further by scholars

(Carlson, 2018; Groshek and Tandoc, 2017), the digital impact on gatekeeping what information contains newsworthiness is not distributed evenly across different levels of analysis. Less evidence has shown that the workflow of routine in a newsroom is vulnerable to digital presence.

3.4.3 Verification and news facts

Although fewer studies interpret the importance of verification in the framework of gatekeeping, verification or cross-checking is the core of journalistic works. In the hierarchical model of influence, verification is a crucial process for journalists to validate their news claims and this process is subject to the routine and organizational culture of newsrooms (Shoemaker and Vos, 2009). In this section, I begin by addressing the dominant challenges for journalism, truth, and verification from the western perspectives. Challenges to public notions of "truth" in recent years have been aligned with political and journalistic speech aligned with the rise of populism in governments from across Europe, to the United States, and to parts of the Global South (Katz and Mays, 2019). Elevated by discourse aimed at journalism related to governance following the 2016 presidential election in the U.S., scholars have focused on the influence of social media to sway voters, and journalism about politics and social conditions, as well as positioning government bodies and journalists as fact-checkers and authorities on the truth (Gutsche, 2018).

Considerable research explores practices of journalistic verification in Western journalism (Godler and Reich, 2013; 2017; Graves, 2016; Hermida, 2012; Kovach and Rosenstiel, 2014). While there are various ways journalists verify information – from critically questioning sources and their credibility to double- and triple-checking facts – journalists report that they desire accurate information for their reporting

(Godler and Reich, 2017; Martin, 2017; McNair, 2018) and argue that verification is "a critical part of the news-gathering and information dissemination process" (Brandtzaeg et al., 2016: 325).

Western journalists focus on fact-checking and use of social media in the quest to approach, identify, and spread what is considered to be true (Brandtzaeg et al., 2016). In recent years, along with the prevalence of social media, a large number of Western scholars find that journalistic verification is extremely important in the digital age from two aspects: On one hand, journalists have to determine what to verify among huge amounts of information and sources (Lecheler and Kruikemeier, 2016; Van Leuven et al., 2018). On the other hand, journalists are increasingly using social media to verify information and sources, including Twitter and Facebook (Brandtzaeg et al., 2018; Schifferes et al., 2014; Coddington, Molyneux and Lawrence, 2014).

Additionally, recent scholarship suggests use of online tools for verification surround political journalism (Broersma and Graham, 2012; Coddington, Molyneux and Lawrence, 2014) and moments when online tools augment offline verification practices (Lecheler and Kruikemeier, 2016; Van Leuven et al., 2018; Godler and Reich, 2013). These settings, tools, and practices often serve as guidance for journalistic practices and research about practice in other societies – particularly in terms of measuring a society's journalistic contributions to the public. Yet, these social contexts, tools for seeking and verifying information, and the very role of journalism in society are shaped by deeper cultural and social values of a society, making generalized discussions of "truth," journalism, and journalistic practice less helpful and accurate (Hallin and Mancini, 2012).

3.5 Conclusion

This chapter reviewed how the notion of gatekeeping is constructed in the literature and what major practices can count as part of "gatekeeping" among journalists. As gatekeeping is loosely defined in journalism studies based on experience in the west, this research treats gatekeeping as a practice of news selection. Such selection comprises three major processes at different social levels. First, there is journalistic selection of sources. Secondly, journalists construct the newsworthiness of the information they obtained, according to the organizational guidelines and audience's preferences. Thirdly, journalists have to verify the veracity of the news and make sure that facts are solid enough to support their argument in the news. This process of selection can be analysed based on different social levels, as Shoemaker and Reese (2014) demonstrated. In other word, while journalists "gatekeep" and make decisions about what information is permitted to pass the gate, they are influenced by their professional ideals, organizational rules, routines, the broad media environment and the culture of ideology of the community they live in.

Additionally, this review chapter also has investigated how journalists' gatekeeping practices adapt to the digital environment. Journalists globally are experiencing challenges stemming from social media, user contents, public relations and many different types of amateur practices, with an evident trend showing that these amateur practices are becoming professional. This trend has pushed journalists to alter their attitudes and behaviours towards news production, while also encouraged scholars to think about what journalism is becoming (Deuze and Witshge, 2020). As reviewed in this chapter, it appears that journalists are losing territory and their lead in

news production, in the wake of information-related industries penetrating journalism (Anderson, 2016).However, in this scenario journalists are not entirely passive, given that their professional capabilities and knowledge can warrant the quality of news they make in many cases. These claims are supported by the "ground-up" observation from western scholars (Deuze and Witschge, 2020), which urgently needed to be applied to other social contexts. "There is, however, a lack of knowledge concerning the extent to which journalism studies today is framed, on the one hand, by emerging theories and perspectives and, on the other hand, by modifications or adoptions of old theories—but also what constitute the theoretical trends within the interdisciplinary domain" (Steensen and Ahva, 2015: 4).

This thesis has not been designed as a theory-driven research (see Chapter One) because of the indigenous nature of Chinese journalism. After having engaged with journalists in the field, I returned to the literature to engage with debates about gatekeeping studies. Regarding how to place "gatekeeping" in this research, I generally frame it as news selection involving a variety of procedures, from which journalists differentiate themselves from other occupations. This is because gatekeeping studies is mostly combined with a hierarchical model of influence concerning what information can pass the gate or not (Shoemaker, 1991), and this is inappropriate for explaining the complexity of journalism in non-western regions. In China, for example, the interpretation in terms of organizational and institutional features of journalism are blended. Accordingly, in the section in this chapter questioning the validity of gatekeeping in today's research, I noted two concerns

relevant to this research. Firstly, how can such an old theory be responsible for explaining digital emergence? Secondly, how the experience from non-western can be considered empirically and academically? This is what I am going to discover in this research. In the next chapter, I will explain how I identified the digital impact on investigative journalism as posing a greater threat than the restrictions imposed by the Communist Party of China.

Chapter Four: Methodology

4.1 Introduction

This chapter will explain the methods by which I examined the practices of investigative journalists in China. In doing so, firstly I introduce the relevant literature about qualitative methods, specifically focusing on interviews and participant observation. Then I outline the methodological application in Chinese journalism studies and the issues rising from interviews and participant observation in China. Also, in this part, I discuss why I used the material from my participant observation as background information only. Thirdly, I explain how I approached my participants and how the interviews were carried out and analysed. I also discuss how I overcame the methodological issues I noticed in previous research. Fourthly, I explain how my consumption of news reporting during the fieldwork helped me to identify the potential participants and prepare the interviews. Finally, this chapter concludes by providing a self-reflection on the fieldwork. This chapter not only provides a description of the methods in detail, but also justifies using these methods to study journalism in China.

4.2 Literature review on qualitative methods: interview and field observation

Prior to introducing how this research was carried out, the first section of this chapter will look at the literature about qualitative methods and how interviews and participant observation are discussed among scholarship. Then, I will introduce how these methods are employed to study Chinese journalism.

4.2.1 Qualitative interviews

Qualitative research is distinctive for its attempts to understand reality from the perception of individuals, where the meaning is generated from the interaction of different social relations. Arksey and Knight (1999:10) argue that "qualitative approaches concentrate on understanding the thinking and behaviours of individuals and groups in specific situations." Compared with quantitative methods, qualitative research looks at the real world from a dynamic aspect (Bryman and Burgess, 1999). The meaning of social practices comes from the contextualized situations in which different social actors are situated. With qualitative methods, researchers can capture the relations, interactions and perceptions of individuals.

Among qualitative methods, interviews are widely applied in social science to investigative social life from an individual, specific and subjective account. As argued by Kvale and Brinkmann (2009:17), "interviewing is a process where interviewer and interviewee through their relationship produce knowledge." The knowledge produced from interviews is characterized as "relational, conversational, contextual, linguistic, narrative and pragmatic" (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009:47). Researchers can identify the profound meanings from interviewees expressing their views on some aspect of reality along with the flow of conversation. The purpose of qualitative interviews is to understand daily life from "the subjects" own perspectives' (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009: 24). Thus, as Arksey and Knight (1999:34) argue, interviewing is best at "exploring the stories and perspectives of informants". This is a research method which highlights the importance of subjective interpretation of experience.

In my research project, semi-structured interviews are the major method. Semi-structured interviewing is a method in which "main questions and script are fixed, but interviewers are able to improvise follow-up questions and to explore meanings and areas of interest that emerge" (Arksey and Knight, 1999:7). Lofland et al. (2006) note that semi-structured interviews highlight the dynamics of the dialogue and the interaction with interviewees. The interview can be constructed in a way to promote dialogue. With a set of drafted interview questions, a flexible space is left between interviewee and interviewer. Sometimes, unexpected turns may occur due to the questions given by the interviewer (Brennen, 2017). The flexibility of semi-structured interviews allows the interviewer to adjust the centre and flow of conversation. So, the use of interviews is a powerful method to achieve one's research aims with a series of focused and intensive dialogues with interviewees.

4.2.2 Participant observation

Although this research does not rely on the data collected by participant observation, I still would like to briefly introduce the rationale of this qualitative method, which helped me in identifying the object of this research.

Participant observation is a qualitative method derived from ethnography and it shares much of the strengths of ethnography. Basically, researchers employ participant observation to understand the interests, rules, values and relationships inside a particular group (Brennen, 2017; Gans, 1999). Gans (1999:42) defines participant observation as a "formal participatory role in a social situation without the emotional involvement that normally accompanies participation". Furthermore, as

pointed out by Schlesinger (1981:363), ethnographic methodologies provide an approach for researchers to examine the "working ideologies and practices of cultural producers". In journalism studies, with participant observation, every chain of news production can be observed. Journalists' working environment, income, hierarchy, mindset and communication skills are all a part of newsroom culture. Thus, as a branch of ethnographic studies, field observation is a crucial method to know the internal tensions among different news production components (Cottle, 2000b).

Additionally, referring to Lofland et al. (2006), participant observation provides researchers with a natural environment to understand surrounding social settings and human interactions. Gans (1999) suggests that lack of involvement is the ideal of participant observation. For journalism studies, participant observation allows for researchers to have a closer look at not only journalists' activities, but also other activities relating to their work, which may impact on news productions. As Singer (2008) puts it, journalism and ethnographic methods share similarities by means of collecting knowledge. Both require observation and interview. Therefore, participant observation can make a bridge between abstract theory and grounded experience by witnessing and recording nuances in the field.

Although field observations and interviews are widely used to explore journalists' behaviour in newsrooms and their activities, the setting of the researcher may generate a twofold issue in the field. First, Lofland et al. (2006) argue that one of the difficulties for researchers is how the group perceives the role that researchers played in the field, whether insider or outsider. This perception may lead to physical

or emotional tension between researchers and the specific group. Coddington (2015) considers that it can be difficult for researchers to have an in-depth and thorough observation of journalists' work, because the activity of researchers can be disruptive. Second, ethical issues emerge with the issue of protecting the identity of the social group (Lipson, 1994; Lofland et al., 2006). Singer (2008) notes that ethnographic researchers have a responsibility to guarantee journalists' safety by ensuring consent to use the data gained from journalists, especially when journalists talk about their confidential sources. Although participant observation is not the key source of my research, it provided me with detailed background knowledge that has helped me situate the commercial aspect of media production in contrast to the journalistic production of news.

4.3 Reviewing previous studies and practical issues

In this section, I move to look at how previous scholars approached Chinese journalism studies, and with what methods. First, I note that qualitative studies into Chinese journalism is still limited in number due to the difficulties of accessing the field and explaining indigenous phenomena, although the number of academic publications is growing. Based on the first point, secondly, I identify that little research explains clearly how researchers make sense of the meaning of Chinese indigenous expressions which do not exist in English. I suggest this is not only a matter about methods and translation in non-western studies, but also about how improvements to established theories can be justified by analysing the "verbalization and actions" of research objects (Hubscher-Davidson, 2011:7).

4.3.1 Methodological review of previous studies of Chinese journalism

Compared with research into western journalism, studies on Chinese journalism do not have a long tradition. Most of the studies emerged after the media reform in 1978 (see Chapter Two). Along with this media reform, what was imported into China was not only American style journalism, but also the scholarly methods used in journalism studies. In Lee and Wang's research (2014:224), they summarize the methodological approaches to Chinese investigative journalism from 1978 to 2013. The methods most employed were survey and documentary research, yet methods are not specified into the category of qualitative or quantitative.

Many studies of Chinese journalism adopt documentary and archive research methods to look into the implications of policy and the Party's regulation of Chinese journalism historically. This stream includes various topics: the development of news concepts by renowned Chinese journalists (Huang, 2016; Maras and Nip, 2015), power struggles in media structure (Tong, 2010), the reform of Chinese media (Zhou, 2000; Shao et al. 2016), marketization and journalistic practices (Bandurski and Hala, 2010), geographical relations to journalists' reporting (Tong, 2013) and the decline of investigative journalism (Tong, 2018).

Studies, such as interviews and participant observation, appeared extensively at the beginning of this century. These methods were largely applied in examining the topics surrounding journalists' role perceptions, journalist-organization relationships, journalist-Party relationships, collaborative practices between journalists and other social actors. For instance, De Burgh (2003) published a book which elaborates how

Chinese journalists came into being as a distinct community and what fostered their role perception. Later, Polumbaum and Xiong (2008) conducted abundant interviews and a long-term ethnography with journalists from different news organizations across China to explore how journalists perceive their industry and the role they played. Along with Chinese media reform in the digital age, the use of interviews has become a major approach to exploring digital collaboration between professional journalists and citizen journalists (Xin, 2010; Bei, 2013; Tong, 2015b). In addition to investigating digital transformation, the journalists-market relation is another key debate in Chinese journalism studies. Sparks et al. (2016) carried out a series of interviews in Chinese newspaper organizations to examine the discrepancy between US and China in responding to media marketization. With a multi-sites ethnographic approach, Liu's (2017) research provides a new framework to access journalistic occupational culture in Chinese metro newspapers, whereas with similar methods, Hassid (2016) categorizes the role of Chinese journalists by analysing their strategies in responding to Party censorship. Moreover, Li and Sparks (2016) examine the economic pressures on investigative reporting with a specific case on *Beijing News*.

When it comes to investigative journalism, qualitative methods, especially for ethnography and field observation, are not applied as widely as to other forms of journalism. On the one hand, investigative reporting is featured as negative or critical reporting, which may involve political sensitivity. So, activities of investigative journalists are usually secret, discrete and independent (Wang, 2016). It is hard to follow their investigation and observe their practices in the field. On the other hand,

the number of investigative journalists has been decreasing drastically in recent years, as mentioned in the introductory chapter. Thus, both aspects present difficulties to studying Chinese investigative journalists.

Despite this, scholars have tried to access the field to achieve an in-depth understanding of journalistic practice over the years. For instance, De Burgh (2003) discusses the professional identity of TV investigative journalists with a number of interviews. Since 2006, Tong (2011) has conducted substantial interviews, more than 100, and also field observation in two newspaper organizations separately during her doctoral research. With these empirical data, Tong (2008; 2011) demonstrates a systematic and comprehensive understanding of Chinese investigative journalism in terms of their legitimacy, professionalism, organizational routinization and institutionalization. Then, by interviewing 42 investigative journalists specializing in environmental reporting from 2011-2013, Tong (2015c; 2017) explores the role investigative journalists played in the tension between modernization and environmental risks in contemporary Chinese society and how journalists use their knowledge in news production. In addition, Wang (2016) also traces the role transformation of investigative journalists from 2009-2015. In doing so, her research includes interviewing hundreds of journalists from more than 30 news organizations across different regions in China.

4.3.2 Two issues of methodological concern in previous studies

Although many attempts have been made in applying qualitative methods into studying Chinese journalism from the east to the west, two issues arise while

conducting qualitative research with human-participation methods. Because my research is largely based on the data collected by interviews, I will focus on introducing these interview-related issues in previous research and how my research overcomes these issues in the later section.

As written previously, Chinese investigative journalists is a group which is hard to study for their occupational characteristics, such as being independent, discrete and sensitive (Wang, 2016). Based on these characteristics, most renowned researchers are former journalists in China (Tong, 2011; Wang, 2016; Xu, 2015; Zhao, 2000). In their research, scholars mention that their previous experience as journalists in China is helpful for them in identifying problems in Chinese journalism and in approaching the sample group of research. For instance, Xu (2014:88) writes that participants in her research are normally former colleagues, with part of her data being based on personal communications.

It is true that when the researcher is an insider, the researcher can access the field easily. However, disadvantages can be observed from the aspect of role conflict, such as interviewing colleagues of a higher ranking status or being so close to the participants (Arksey and Knight, 1999:67). Moreover, as I observed the research from Tong (2011; 2015c) and Wang (2016), I found that they employed a large number of data from renowned investigative journalists and editors in China. It is doubtful if samples of novice investigative journalists are included, to any significant extent. In my research, I interviewed not only veteran journalists, but also young journalists who may still be novices in this field. The reason why this issue is important to address

here is that, according to my observation, veteran journalists are easier to approach than young journalists. This is in contrast to my expectation. Young journalists, who have been working in this industry for 5 years or less, hesitated over whether to join in my research. This is because they considered themselves as "not experienced" and they could not provide me with as much information as those veterans. For instance, Participants (1, 6 and 18) demonstrated a modest attitude when I contacted them. Participant 18 said, "I have not spent much time working as an investigative journalist, so I am afraid I may ruin your (interview). I cannot provide useful data." They assume themselves that they are not qualified as "investigative journalists" from an empirical aspect. Similarly, as participant 6 said, "I haven't conducted much reporting individually and most of it was guided by a veteran journalist or an editor. They are experienced." But in the following conversation, she told me that there had been some disagreements between her and the editor, and she had been asked to adjust the reporting style. Therefore, in my research, I suggest it is meaningful to examine ideas and perceptions among young journalists.

The second issue I noticed is about translation. It is not common to see scholars discuss how they translate the interview and fieldwork materials from Chinese into English. Although more and more scholars interested in Chinese journalism nowadays are not Chinese native speakers (De Burgh, 2003; Stockmann, 2013; Hassid, 2016; Svensson, 2014), interviews are conducted in Chinese. Herzfeld (2003) notes that the importance of translation in ethnographic studies is in transmitting cultural knowledge from one context to another. As argued by

Maneesriwongul and Dixon (2004:175), “quality of translation and validation of the translated instrument plays a significant role in ensuring that the results obtained in cross-cultural research are not due to errors in translation, but rather are due to real differences or similarities between cultures in the phenomena being measured.” Indeed, when the words and subjects cannot be translated from the source language to the target language, the way that researchers decode the meaning embedded in those exotic practices can influence research findings regarding what can be conceptualized and theorized.

Under the condition that “items are translatable” (Lopez, Connor and Maliski, 2008:1730), scholars note that Brislin’s (1970) translation model is deemed the best method to translate from the source language to another (English) so far (Regmi, Naidoo and Pilkington, 2010; Lopez, Connor and Maliski, 2008). Specifically, according to scholars explanation (Regmi, Naidoo and Pilkington, 2010), Brislin’s translation model involves forward-translation, which means a bilingual person translates from the source language to the target language (English), and back-translation, which means another bilingual person translates from the target language (English) to the source language. Regarding how I translated my transcriptions, I will discuss this in a later section of this chapter.

4.4 Accessing the field: participatory observation in Xinhua Net

Due to lacking experience in the journalism industry previously and limitations of accessibility, I shifted the research object during my fieldwork in Beijing in 2017. That is to say, the fieldwork had two parts: participant observation in an online media

product centre, and interviews with investigative journalists in Beijing, targeting two different research groups. In this section, I will introduce how I accessed the field and why I shifted my research focus after a six-week field observation. Participant observation provides me with the background information, but interviews are the main sources of this research.

Before accessing the field, obtaining permission from the "gatekeeper" of the field is an important step (Arksey and Knight, 1999; Oliver, 2010). My plan was to access a mainstream news organization in Beijing where I grew up, whereas I had no preference which to access. Before starting field observation in late July 2017. I spent half a month building my contact and relationship with a family friend to find a proper news organization in Beijing. With the help of this family friend, I entered the "integrated media product innovation centre" of Xinhua Net as an intern.

4.4.1 Overview of Xinhua Net

Xinhua Net was established in 1997 as the website of Xinhua News Agency. In 2000, Xinhua Net (Xinhuanet Co. LTD) became a national company but was not registered as a listed corporation until 2016. Xinhua News Agency is not only a correspondent platform, but more importantly also a ministry-level institution, which is subordinated to the Central government of China (Xin, 2017). Due to the complicated nature of this organization, negotiations between me and the gatekeeper took a long time before I was able to gain permission with a consent form, because there are no clear regulations on conducting fieldwork in Xinhua Net, as the gatekeeper said.

In the first week of participant observation I tried to tell my colleagues the general idea of this research by showing them the *Participant Information Sheet* (PIS), and making it clear that I was open to answering any questions about my identity, role and research. However, I was not encouraged to talk to everyone about my research in this centre, in case of being disruptive, as my gatekeeper recommended. Although there are more than 100 staff in the centre where I was based, I only had working contact with several of them. Before introducing my experience in the field, I would like to provide a contextual background of this media centre.

The integrated media product innovation centre of Xinhua Net was established in 2015, and was named previously as multimedia centre. As the biggest department of Xinhua Net, its establishment is under the endorsement of the Party to answer the call of boosting the digital media economy (Zhang, 2012). Inside this media centre, there are more than 10 individual sectors and they are classified into two sets of production lines, horizontally and vertically, as I observed. Horizontally, the production line consists of multi-media programs and is called the "integrated media products matrix". It includes Focus on data news, Xinhua·Drone (unmanned aerial vehicle), VR/AR Channel, Xinhua/video, Xinhua Live, Xinhua Radio, ntpic' (picture news), Xinhua Micro-video comment, etc. Each program has its focused area and workload. All media products from these programs are distributed to online outlets, mobile apps and PC terminals separately. Vertically, the production line includes technical groups, including gathering, editing, directing, recording, post-production

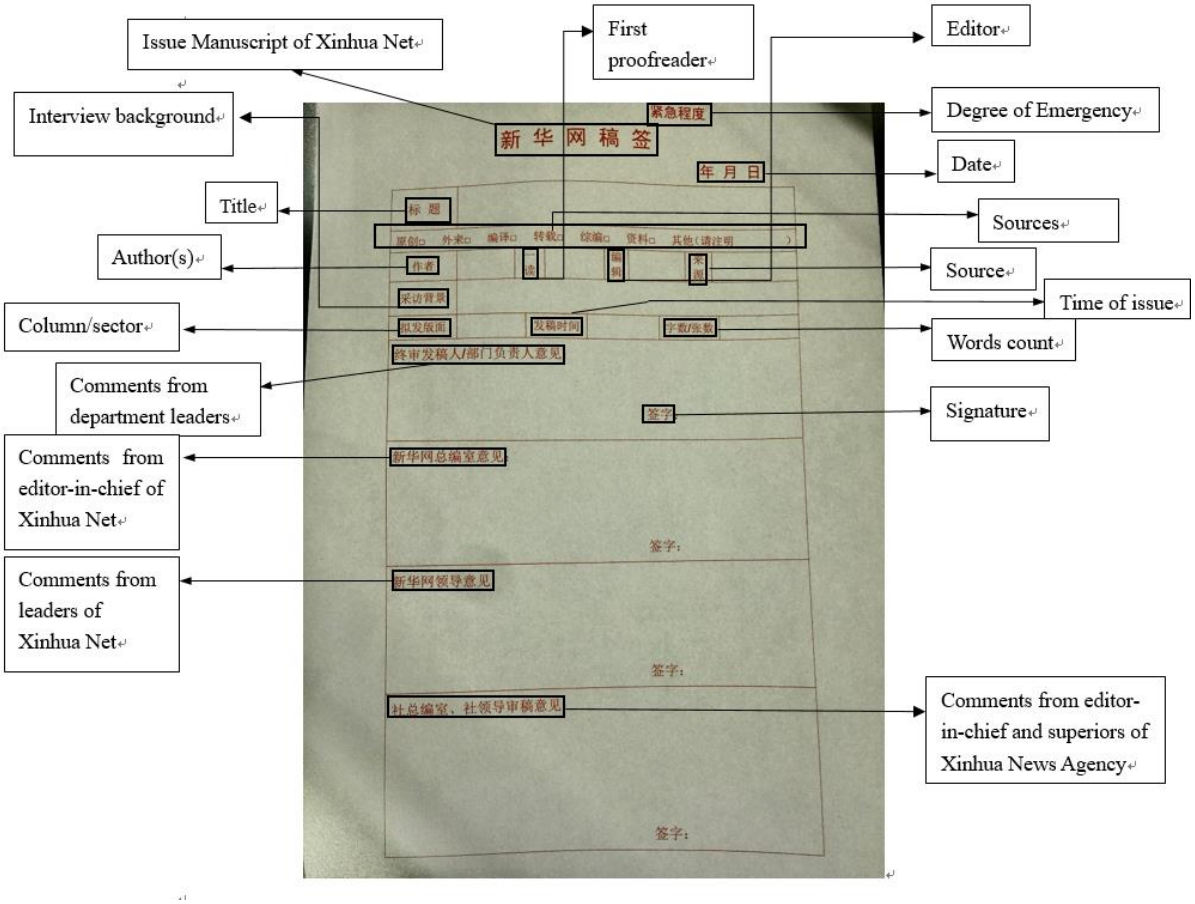
(video news and live news) and in-depth interviews. The two sets of production lines are intertwined with each other. According to a colleague, cross-program collaboration is very common in daily working routine. When important activities occur, technical staff in Xinhua Net will give support to frontline interviews and video-shooting. High mobility and flexibility in staff's arrangements are two evident features in this centre's activity.

In terms of the organizational structure, every individual program has one program director, two or three staff and several interns. The distribution of staff is not even, and is normally on the basis of the scale of each program. A program director is in charge with the selection of topic, liaison with interviewees, arranging interviews, video-recording, video-editing, post-production of the video, uploading and distributing videos to different platforms. In addition to the video platforms of Xinhua Net itself, other commercial video websites, for instance, two major online video platforms in China, *Aiqiyi*, and *Tencent* are also included in the uploading list. Xinhua Net self-produced video programs are also subscribed to by some regional TV stations and enterprises in either a free or a paid way. Because of the fast pace of marketization in the Chinese media industry, Xinhua Net is also encouraged to build its renowned brand by providing customized media products for extensive customers and commercial partners.

Apart from this media centre, a multimedia integrated broadcast and control centre, a mobile internet centre, a data analysis room, an experimental observation room, a user experience lab, an office of editor in chief and a future media

convergence institute are several other components of Xinhua Net focusing on media research, development and administration. Moreover, there is a global news centre on another floor, which is considered as an online newsroom. However, nearly half of the hard news distributed to its online platform is not produced by Xinhua Net, which means that Xinhua Net does not have an individual journalists reporting team. To a large degree, news reporting is from journalists and correspondents based in Xinhua News Agency, whereas Xinhua Net operates as a news outlet and business centre. "We don't make hard news a lot", I was told by one of my colleagues.

Figure 4 Issuing Manuscript in Xinhua Net



Xinhua Net has a strict procedure for issuing articles, videos, programs, and shares a similar editorial standard and system to Xinhua News Agency, even for entertainment

contents. For instance, three types of editor (editor, editor-in-chief, editor on shift) need to sign the "issuing manuscript" (Figure 4) individually before uploading media products to the online management system. Three types of editor respectively refer to the editor of a program, the editor of a sector/centre, and the editor on duty. The "issuing manuscript (*gao qian*)" is a procedural document that confirms the publication of media products. When it comes to important or nation-wide activities, such as the *One Belt, One Road* conference, which mentions President Xi and uses photos of President Xi or any other important leaders of the Party, such a piece of media coverage is required to be sent to Xinhua News Agency headquartered in Beijing for final censorship to approve all the details of the photo. During my time as an intern, I interviewed two of my colleagues. Although I was not allowed to record the interviews, I was permitted to use the information provided by them.

4.4.2 Reflexion on my role in Xinhua Net

Regarding my role, I identified myself as an outsider psychologically, because although I participated in the process of media production in the duration of my fieldwork, I was obliged to do many different types of work, not all in media production. I was allocated to a program mainly for producing popular science videos. The normal workload is two episodes of video for each week, and each episode is 4-5mins long. Such videos are presented with a combination of animation and interviews with medical experts. "Basically, every published episode should be prepared 4 weeks in advance", according to this program director. The uploading system is quite complicated with different entrance portals. Xinhua Net has its own

video making and uploading software. Every episode has to be sent to different platforms individually. According to my colleague, she considered the uploading system was not convenient and got clogged very often, because of the huge volume of video uploading. According to my calculation and observation, within every 20 minutes there are more than 19 pieces of news, including video and textual forms. Many are waiting in the queue to be uploaded. Besides these, daily working routines also include: running this program on Apps and web pages, issuing new episodes on the program, collecting feedback from web pages, writing scripts, making commercial contracts with enterprises, attending meetings, writing brief news and making project plans for new programs.

In addition to what I described about my role as an intern, I also did some chores sometimes relating to media production and sometimes not. For instance, I needed to summarize and write a document about what my colleague and I did every week. Another part of my job was to socialize with potential clients (such as delegates from medical enterprises) at conferences, who may want to customize some media products to enlarge their social impacts. Moreover, I also engaged in writing a plan about launching a new online program, which aims to increase the diversity of current programming. Also, I was obliged to write articles about interviews with specialists in media science. Moreover, I was asked to negotiate an agreed time between different sectors of this department to film the video. There was also some work I cannot mention here in detail, according to the requirement of my colleague.

Thus, I acted as an intern in Xinhua Net to collect the information relating to my research by finishing assignments and tasks given by my program leaders and superiors; meanwhile, I carried out my research with this role. The role of intern is different from researcher. In this scenario, how to shift the role of an intern to a researcher is important to know, because it matters the proceeding of a piece of research. I have to be clear about what gave meaning to a specific role in two different contexts and it is common that these two roles were contradicted in certain cases. On the one hand, the role I perform inside Xinhua Net is according to the organizational requirements and also this role has to adhere to the organizational guidelines during the work. In most occasions, I received guidance from superiors and experiential peers. As mentioned in the former section, many assignments were not about producing media contents, but to fulfil this role, I had to carry on with these assigned workloads. On the other hand, as a researcher, apart from collecting information, I also have to critically evaluate the information I obtained afterwards. Although the information I obtained from this experience was not directly helpful for me to know more about journalism and news production in China, I benefited from it because I was aware of the issues and problems emerging in the transition of the media system in China. As suggested by literature, what can influence a researcher how to perform her/his role in an organization while doing ethnographic observation is not only the specific works and positions that researcher worked with, but also the domains of knowledge researcher has already gained previously (Järventie-Thesleff, Logemann, Piekkari and Tienari, 2016, Cui, 2015). Less existing research argued the importance

of this, because most researchers in Chinese journalism studies were former numbers of a media group. In my case, the challenges I was faced with are more than how to balance the role of insider and outsider (see 4.5.3). Moreover, the meaning of role reflection to myself and this research is how to transit the raw information into knowledge and how to make the research benefit from such transition. In the next part, I will elaborate why I decided to change the focus of research, as a part of researcher's reflection after I left Xinhua Net.

4.4.3 Why I left Xinhua Net

The complexity completely uncertain as to what was the centre of my and diversity of my work as an intern made me confused about my role, job. In addition to making videos, I was frequently asked to do different things, which I called "non-content producing activities". Referring to my colleague's words, this is due to the fact that this department is always short of people. When someone is absent in another sector of this department, his/her work is assigned to others. So it seems common that someone focuses on doing a particular task this month, whereas in the next month, he/she may never touch such work again. My puzzle was solved two months later, when I started to interview. More than one participant mentioned the disadvantages of introducing marketization into national news media organizations/enterprises. My participants suggested that the media reform in media organizations was not carried out very effectively to save revenue in general, due to the bureaucratic nature pre-established in organizations being "incorrigible" (Participant 18). Xu (2014) mentioned in her dissertation that the bureaucracy of institutions can be traced from

the 1970s in China, which bureaucracy has been practiced informally. The media reform started in the 1980s could not eradicate the situation where interpersonal relationships are embedded in the working relationships. This situation could influence the workflow of individuals inside one organization.

More evidence can be found in a recent paper. Wang and Sparks (2019a) argued that Chinese newspapers have demonstrated different strategies to save the situation of advertising decline. One of the findings they (Wang and Sparks, 2019a:1) highlighted is that journalists are obliged to do more "non-news gathering activities". Although Xinhua Net is not a newspaper organization, their findings do fit my observation. My experience suggests that such self "saving strategies" of media organizations have partly failed because the bureaucracy is incorrigible. This situation accelerates the demise of any media organization which hopes to produce professional news contents. On the one hand, media organizations stress the task of increasing the revenue on media professionals without introducing more staff; on the other hand, those media professionals also have to shoulder the job of producing the content catering for market taste. "It is totally a mess," Participant 20 said, speaking of organizational responses to the commercial reform nowadays. "No matter reform or not, those serious media[21] are doomed to die."

Therefore, my decision about leaving was due to these entangled reasons. The organizational bureaucracy made me unable to fit into this organization. Part of the organizational bureaucracy has already been formed by the informal relationship

[21] Serious media refers to the mainstream, traditional and quality media aiming to produce hard news.

between colleagues. I failed to be an “intruder” into such a network of relationships in order to be able to observe media content-producing activities, more or less. This reason led to my internship being involved with many “non-content producing activities”. As noted by Woodley and Smith (2020), uncomfortable experiences during doctoral fieldwork could facilitate the researchers shifting their research focus and method application. Here I reckon that being overloaded with such “non-content producing activities” was an uncomfortable experience for me, because it was a barrier to being able to obtain an in-depth knowledge of Chinese journalism studies. Subsequently, this made me shift my research object.

Therefore, this part of my empirical data, gained by participant observation in Xinhua Net, is not discussed in any detail in my research, although it has provided me with background knowledge. With this experience, I started to have an understanding of how marketized transformation takes place in Chinese mainstream media organizations and how this trend is nibbling away at the professional journalism industry through attracting talents with better financial recommendation and loss of standards of professional skills. “Generally speaking, working in the commercial media for 2-3 years has already been a long time”, as my colleague suggested. Later, two participants I came across in the following interview mentioned that they worked in Xinhua Net before, then transferred to investigative journalism later on, because writing investigative reporting brought them a sense of achievement and showed their professional values in writing. Thus, I still hope to keep my attention on professional

journalists, a promising and endangered social group that has great impact on the public and society by disseminating knowledge in the form of news.

4.5 Interviews

Semi-structured in-depth interviews are the key method of this research. This section will introduce where I carried out this research and how I approached and identified investigative journalists in China.

4.5.1 Why in Beijing?

In this research, all the participants work in news organizations based in Beijing, although some of the headquarters of the organizations are not. Beijing was chosen as the research site for three reasons. Firstly, most investigative journalists are based in Beijing. According to Zhang and Cao (2017), Chinese investigative journalists are highly centralized in big cities. The number of investigative journalists in Beijing makes up 41% of total (175). Compared with six years ago, Zhang and Cao (2017) found that the number of investigative journalists in Beijing increased 11%, because many headquarters of news organizations are centralized in Beijing, such as *Beijing News*, *Beijing Youth Daily*, *China Youth Daily, Caixin Weekly*.

Secondly, we are still relatively poorly informed about Beijing, as a particular and individual site of research regarding its characteristics in the field of journalism. In previous research, Guangdong province, where the renowned media organization *Southern Weekly* is based (Zhao, 1998; Tong, 2011), was taken as a key site for research. This is because Guangdong as well as Shanghai demonstrated a quick response to the media reform in the 1980s. *SW* is a provincial official newspaper in

Guangdong and belongs to the Southern Newspaper Group, which is famous for its liberal and critical reporting (Li and Sparks, 2016). However, "the 2013 *Southern Weekly* incident"[22] led to the decline of *SW*. Meanwhile, the rise of *Beijing News* attracted many talents to come to Beijing. *Beijing News* was established as a "joint venture between the provincial – level Southern Newspaper Group and the central-level *Guangming Daily*" (Li and Sparks, 2016: 418). Thus, Beijing has become a main base for investigative journalists following the decline of *SW*.

Thirdly, in the beginning of this century, the printed media launched a series of reform and innovative strategies to deal with the market pressures (Li and Sparks, 2016; Wang, Sparks and Hu, 2018; Li, 2018). Beijing is a good site to observe how the transformation of traditional media has been and is influenced by digital technology and marketization. As investigative journalism is an expensive journalism, the media organizations which can fund an investigative reporting department or in-depth reporting department have a considerable revenue. In order to increase the revenue, the printed-media in Beijing reacted very quickly. For instance, *Beijing News* expanded and adjusted its reporting topics to attract more audience, from "scrutinizing authority to reporting tragic individuals" (Li and Sparks, 2016: 424). Moreover, *China Youth Daily*, as a central-level Party organ newspaper, has demonstrated a "popular official" characteristic by applying emotional, sensational strategies in reporting individual stories. (Wang, Sparks and Hu, 2018:1216). Meanwhile, *Caixin Media* in

[22] The 2013 *Southern Weekly* incident refers to a conflict which arose over government censorship of a "New Year's Greeting" published in the Chinese newspaper *Southern Weekly*.

2017 became the first paid-subscription online news media in China. All of these media developments provided me with reasons to study journalism in Beijing.

Beijing, as the political centre of China, embraces abundant social resources and has a high mobility of population. Situated in this fast-developing city, the journalism industry is also famous for its quick response to the surrounding environment (Li, 2018). All the reasons mentioned above make sense of my choice that Beijing is the key site of this research, where the vicissitude, transformation and transition can be observed. In the next section, I will concentrate on explaining how I approach my interviewees.

4.5.2 Approaching to interviewees

I left Xinhua Net after a six-week participant observation to find journalists to cooperate in my research. In the following four months, I made contact with 42 people in Beijing, including journalists, editors, correspondents, commentators, column writers, administrative staff in different news organizations, scholars from academic institutions and universities, environmental protectors, who all provided me with help in this research. The communication and contact between me and those who did not participate in my research also helped me to narrow down the scope of my research and build up a general understanding of Chinese media landscape (Table 3).

Interviewees who joined in my research were mainly recruited in four ways: introduction by friends (5), retrieval from the internet or social media (3), snowball sampling (20) and seeking out a published author (1). In total, I carried out 29 interviews with journalists, but 25 of the 29 are used as my research sample. This

research sample constitutes one third of the total number of investigative journalists in Beijing. I will not generalize the result of this research by claiming that all the investigative journalists in Beijing conform to what I suggest in the findings, but this research sample is representative.

For the non-included participants, one of them (Participant 4) is not based in Beijing. Another three participants did not allow me to record and they refused to be mentioned in this research. Thus the remaining 25 interviewees are all based in Beijing and the interviews were conducted from 26th September 2017 to 16th December 2017, and recorded and transcribed with their consent. In terms of their identity, nineteen of the total were investigative journalists when the interviews took place. The remaining six journalists had more than one year's experience in writing investigative reporting, although they were not based in an investigative reporting department at the moment of my interviews. As participants suggested, I was not encouraged to share these recordings with others and I needed to cover their identifiable information with anonymity in this research.

Table 3 Participants Information List

No.	Date	Gender	Working experience (year)	Time length of interview (minutes)	Sector in news organization	Media type
01	18 Sep. 2017	Female	Within 1 year	44	In depth	Newspaper
02	16 Sep. 2017	Female	2	80	In depth	Newspaper
03	22 Sep. 2017	Male	10	101	In depth	Newspaper
04	10 Oct. 2017	Male	2	63	In depth	Newspaper/Website
05	24 Oct. 2017	Female	Within 1 year	48	Investigative/ environment	Magazine (weekly)
06	12 Oct. 2017	Female	8	107	Political	Newspaper
07	13 Oct. 2017	Male	3	94	Investigative/ current affairs	Website
08	15 Oct. 2017	Female	2	53	Investigative/ Political affair	Newspaper
09	17 Oct. 2017	Male	4	93	In depth	Newspaper
10	18 Oct. 2017	Female	5	65	Political affair	Newspaper
11	21 Oct. 2017	Female	10+[23]	45	Investigative/ current affairs/ political and legal	Magazine (weekly)
12	10 Oct. 2017	Female	5	61	Investigative/environment	Magazine (weekly)
13	24 Oct. 2017	Female	4	70	Features/ Investigative	Magazine (weekly)/ website
14	26 Oct. 2017	Male	4	95	Political and legal/ Investigative	Newspaper
15	26 Oct. 2017	Male	3	52	Political and legal/ Investigative	Newspaper
16	28 Oct. 2017	Male	10+(editor)	99	Investigative/Feature	Newspaper/website
17	28 Oct. 2017	Male	3	121	Investigative	Newspaper

[23] In order to vague the identifiable personal information and according to the requirement of participants, years of working, which are above 10 years, is shown as 10+.

Table 3 Participants Information List (continued)

No.	Date	Gender	Working experience (year)	Time length of interview (minutes)	Sector in news organization	Media type
18	28 Oct. 2017	Male	10 (editor)	109	Investigative	Newspaper
19	30 Oct. 2017	Male	10+ (editor)	50	Investigative	Newspaper
20	1 Nov. 2017	Male	4	110	Investigative	Newspaper
21	2 Nov. 2017	Male	3	75	Investigative	Newspaper
22	19 Oct. 2017	Female	3	59	Investigative	Magazine (weekly)
23	21 Sep. 2017	Female	2	53	Political affair	Newspaper
24	9 Nov. 2017	Female	7	4	Investigative	Newspaper/ Magazine (weekly)
25	12 Dec. 2017	Male	9	87	Investigative	Newspaper
27	15 Aug. 2017	Male	8 (editor)	NA	In-depth reporting	Newspaper
28	28 Nov. 2017	Female	10+	NA	Political and Metropolitan	Newspaper
29	14 Sep. 2017	Female	10+	NA	Management	News Agency
30	17 Jul. 2017	Female	2	NA	Program producer	Xinhua Net
31	17 Jul. 2017	Female	5	NA	Program producer	Xinhua Net

In the following part, I would like to introduce how I built contacts with journalists and two issues I encountered during interviews. After shifting my research focus, I started to recruit journalists focusing on reporting significant social issues. In the beginning, I did not have a strong preference on which type of journalists I hoped to interview. Introduced by a friend, I had an opportunity to join in an editorial meeting of an in-depth reporting department in a mainstream newspaper organization. I wrote some field notes about this editorial meeting. Then, I interviewed three journalists and one editor in this newspaper organization, but I was unable to record the interview with the editor.

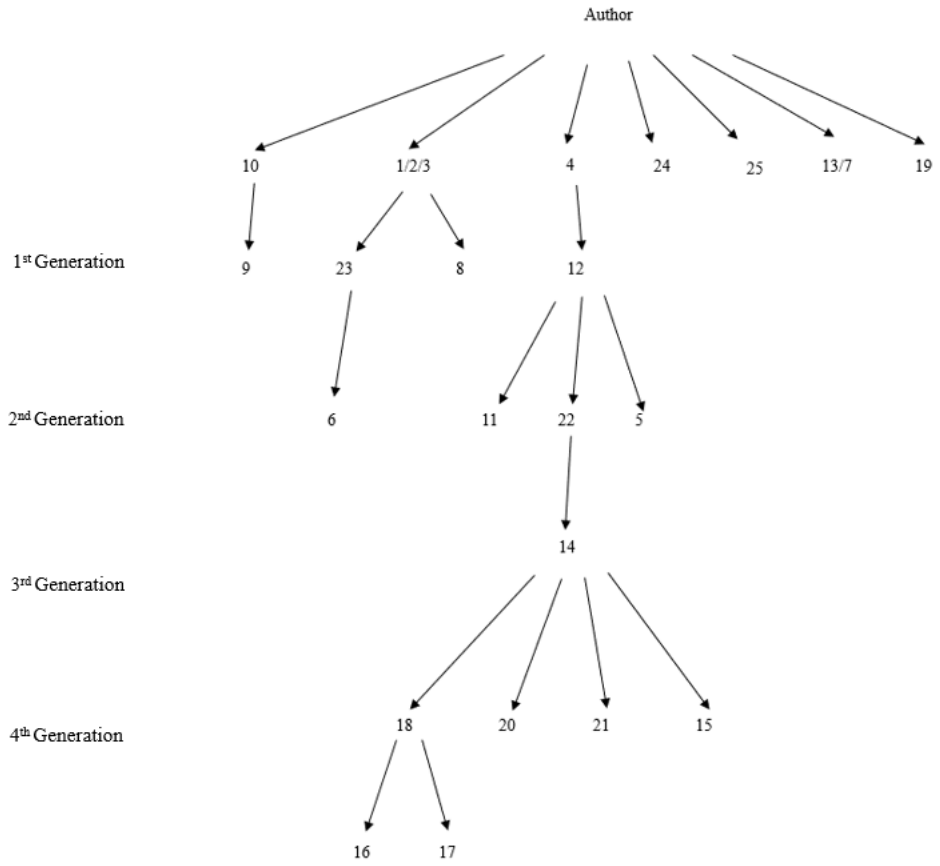
Although I asked my participants if it was possible for them to introduce more journalists working in an in-depth or investigative department, initial responses were limited. Therefore I started to find and contact journalists who had reported breaking

news in Beijing before. By profile searching and retrieving of news on social media and news websites, I established contact with three investigative journalists, and the remaining participants were collected by snowball sampling.

4.5.3 Snowball sampling

Snowball sampling is a key method of recruiting participants in this research. As suggested in the literature, this sampling strategy is largely used to collect participants who mainly belong to hidden, deviant or marginalized groups (Atkinson and Flint, 2001; Noy, 2008). In terms of the distinct advantages of this approach, it is more efficient than other methods for reaching the potential research group, the size of which is hard to estimate. And the researcher can access the research group by referrals in a cumulative process (Browne, 2005). However, disadvantages include possible limitations, because the researcher is absent in the process of subsequent sampling between generations. Partial rights of decision-making on who can be the next participants have been given to previous participants. For instance, the selection bias and "gatekeeping" effect of referrals can impact on potential sampling groups (Noy, 2008). In consequence, participants are more likely to be homogeneous, sharing similar characteristics, because the selection is based on already established social and personal ties.

Figure 5 Snowball stemma



The graphic illustration of my snowball stemma appears above showing how I recruited the participants (Figure 5). I contacted ten journalists by myself. The first generation is the participants that these ten journalists introduced me to. It can be seen that referrals were not provided by a single chain. In this research, I have four participants in the 1st and 2nd generation who introduced me to more journalists to join this research. Participants 12 and 14 have a strong occupational network in the field. Especially, Participant 14 supplied me with four referrals from different news organizations. Apart from the interpersonal relationships among participants in this information tree, there were four issues I faced during the sampling, regarding

identifying potential participants, avoiding a "gatekeeping" effect, referrals' preferences and guaranteeing anonymity among participants.

In this research, investigative journalists are not identified as a marginalized or hidden social group in China, but as a minority sub-group among journalists. It is widely known that investigative journalism is a type of journalism renowned for its characteristics of being discrete, expensive and critical (Wang, 2016; Li and Sparks, 2016; Tong, 2019). Nevertheless, the understanding of "who are investigative journalists" has demonstrated a gap between insiders and outsiders, novices and veterans. As introduced in Chapter One and Two, Chinese investigative journalists are a group which is harder and harder to define nowadays. This is because of the impact from state and non-state factors, and the decline in its numbers. When different participants give different perceptions of "who are investigative journalists" in the stage of sampling, it is important to get rid of their potential assumptions about their occupation.

According to Abell and Myers (2008:157), "interviewers and interviewees bring to the interview assumptions about the attitudes and identity of the other, and about the purpose of the interview". Methodologically, participants' assumptions can bring barriers to snowball sampling. Even though all the participants are from the same occupational community, they share different understandings of their occupation. For example, an editor/journalist working more than 20 years suggested that the number of "real" investigative journalists is currently no more than 10 in the whole of China (Participant 19), so it is hard for him to recommend me to another

one. This is because in his own definition, investigative journalists should be people who have a long working experience in the field and have some impact on society by exposing what is covered by the political powerful. These impacts can be measured by changes in policy, government responses and public recognition. In addition, for the young journalists I interviewed, the reason for them to refuse further recommendations is that they can only introduce their peers for me, instead of prestigious journalists. And they considered that novices' experience was not helpful for my research. This will be discussed in the following section regarding how the interview strategies should be changed according to different genres of interviewees.

As aforementioned, snowball sampling applies under the condition that interviews are carried out harmoniously and participants are willing to make a referral. Normally, I provided some basic criteria for participants in a vague way, because of the small number of this journalistic group. If the criteria in recruiting participants were too specific, referrals would filter potential participants accordingly. So, in order to avoid the disadvantages of a "gatekeeping" effect (Atkinson and Flint, 2001), offering an ambiguous recruiting guideline to referrals is a key strategy for me in retaining some controls in the sampling. In some situations, although the referral did not fit my research, I did gain one more chance to know an insider.

In addition, another interesting phenomenon regarding snowball sampling is the personal preferences of referrals (Atkinson and Flint, 2001). This concern also comes from the impact of a "gatekeeper" bias. For instance, most referrals would not like to introduce their own colleagues to me, preferring to introduce journalists from

other media peers, whose acquaintance they had made in previous reporting activities. This is because they suggested that their colleague would give me similar answers to interview questions. This was a common assumption made by participants. Participants assumed that their colleague shared similar experience, views and attitudes because their practices were shared by the same organizational guidelines. However, Participant 13 introduced three referrals from her own organization, but they were specialized in different reporting fields.

Lastly, anonymity among participants is hard to guarantee, because of this shrinking circle. For example, when a participant was required to introduce another one, his/her would normally ask who had been interviewed, because he/she hoped it would not cause repetitive reference (Participant 19). Even though all of them might know each other, I would not disclose the identity of participants. This is acknowledged before each interview. Moreover, in two cases, I was not trusted by referrals. In order to dispel doubts, I told them that I had already interviewed someone in their news organization, but I had to keep the participants' anonymity. Seemingly, it broke the ice.

Therefore, snowball sampling provides practical advantages for outsiders accessing a sampling group, while disadvantages do also emerge, from the perspective of a potential "gatekeeper", and from the assumptions of referrals. That is to say, when participants agreed, they would introduce referrals to me in a short time, but I did not know how participants communicated with referrals. Participant 15 told

me that he sent our chat screenshot to his friends and asked if they would like to join in my research. “It is time-saving and they would know that I knew you.” He added.

4.5.4 Dilemmas arising during interviews

Before the interviews were carried out, I did not know and did not have contact with any participants in this research. All of them were strangers to me, so as interviews proceeded, three issues arose, regarding the context of interviews, time arrangements, and building mutual trust.

First of all, most interviews were carried out from late September to November in 2017. The contextual background of this period was the holding of the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, between 18th and 24th 2017 in Beijing. The Party’s Congress is held every five years and more than 2000 delegates came to Beijing for the duration. Preparations for this congress started from the beginning of 2017. As most participants suggested, their news organizations received notification from the Publicity Department of the Communist Party of China in January that negative and critical reporting should be restricted to a small number, especially regarding supervision of public power, such as corruption and bribery issues. Since September 2017, according to three participants (10, 18, 25), they had been partly idle. However several participants said that for them it had been an extremely busy time, because of the assigned workload to report the Congress. As I recall, one participant left before the end of the interview, because she had been tasked with providing language supports for foreign journalists’ reporting activities.

Secondly, there were two concerns with time arrangements. On the one hand, it was hard to achieve an agreed time to have face-to-face interviews. Although all participants were based in Beijing, they would go on business to other provinces frequently and unpredictably. So, three interviews were carried out via phone after 11 pm. For face-to-face interviews, it was common that appointments were made more than twice and interviews usually took place in public areas. It is impressive that I made an appointment four times with one journalist. When we met at a café at an agreed time, she had just finished an editorial meeting with loads of reports to write and no time to start our conversation. Meanwhile, I observed her for about two hours while she was writing. After she finished, she sent reports to her editor and waited for amendments. Once feedback from the editor had been given, she would be free. During this time, she went back to her office to meet an editor in terms of using pictures. She went back after another two hours and then we started the interview. Due to the fact that I had waited for her for four hours, she felt so embarrassed that she introduced me to another journalist who had a strong personal network in the field. On the other hand, due to the reason mentioned above, the time length of interviews depended on the individual situation. As illustrated in Table 3, the minimum time length was 40 minutes and the longer interviews could last nearly 2 hours.

The third issue was about building mutual trust between me and participants. This was a process not only about persuasion, but also about sincerity. Along with ongoing interviews, as an outsider I faced two challenges regarding my research

motivation and personal identity, which forced me to think about how to build trust with a person whom I had contact with just once. Although my research motivation was open to all participants, what was questioned by participants was not the content of my research itself. For instance, three participants felt suspicious that my research was about a Chinese phenomenon, rather than a UK one. It would have sounded more reasonable to them if my research object had been a foreign case for a student studying abroad. Although other participants or middle-persons did not raise the same question, we talked about this, research motivation, as well. This required me, at the beginning of our conversation, to provide a certain background knowledge of myself for my participants, which is associated with Chinese PhD students' academic life in foreign countries.

As an outsider, I cannot perceive how they perceive their industry, as mentioned in the previous section. Some participants consider their occupation as being closely linked to political sensitivity. This occurs especially when the researcher is an outsider and the community that researcher enters is "close-knit" (Abell and Myers, 2008: 157). Prior to interviews, I did have to clarify that this research is not about muckraking before they asked or suspected, even though their work is about muckraking.

For example, through snowball sampling, I contacted an investigative journalist who worked in this industry nearly 10 years, but I failed to persuade him to join in this research, because he felt my motivation was suspicious. He gave me two reasons for his suspiciousness. One is that I had no working experience in the

journalism industry before, whereas another who is the sponsor of my research. Thus, it can be seen that trust is a precondition for conversation and is built on the participants' recognition of the interviewer's identity, which is more than being honest.

Despite the fact that recruiting interviewees was time-consuming, with multiple issues, several were keen to help me for two reasons. "I am very glad that somebody still draws attention to us, when most people shift their attention to social media and infotainment news", as Participant 11 said. "Traditional media and serious media are declining. Aggregators, such as todayheadline's app (*jin ri tou tiao*), have more and more downloaders and subscriptions, for its sensational and thrilling headlines," she added. Additionally, when asked why they decided to accept the interview, Participant 12 said, "nowadays, it has become more and more difficult to get people interviewed and open their mouth to talk, from my experience". In this scenario, I benefited from her previous experience of interview during her investigation of news events.

4.5.5 The interviewing process

In the process of liaison, I sent journalists the *Participants Information Sheet* (PIS) to make sure they had a clear understanding of this research and how I would use the data in future. Compared with these documents, participants cared more about the specific questions I would ask them. Journalists would know if they were willing to join in this research by reading interview questions, according to Participant 16. Specific questions are listed in Appendix 2. Once the contact had been established, we

made an appointment to meet in person as soon as possible. Before the interview started, I showed the PIS again in printed form and asked their permission to record. Meanwhile, brief field notes were taken during interviews.

Before starting, I reminded every participant that for any identifiable or sensitive information they considered, such as a scoop or banned news they came across, it depended on them whether to tell or not. This was to make sure that they would not breach organizational regulations, although I would guarantee their anonymity. Also, for any question I asked during interviews, participants were notified that they had the right to refuse to answer. Due to the fact that I was an outsider to them, I tried to build a comfortable and relaxed environment for them by acknowledging the potential hazard to participants. More importantly, I told all of them that it was not permitted to withdraw any information that they mentioned after the end of my fieldwork (January 2018), although on one occasion this did happen. One participant said she would like to withdraw all the content mentioned during the interview. After my persuasion, she decided that she only wanted to withdraw a piece of exclusive news she reported before as an example, whereas I could use the rest of the data. Generally speaking, by clarifying these tips, interviews were processed very efficiently, frankly and freely. After interviews finished, I asked them their feelings about it and as far as I know, everyone was pleased.

4.5.5.1 The flexibility of asking questions

The specific process of interviews varied according to different participants. In most cases, interviews were based on an “ask-and-answer” conversation. After I introduced

myself briefly, the interview began with self-introduction of themselves, including demographic information, working experience, media perception nowadays, their political stance. Although semi-structured interview questions were provided, the random questions I asked during interviews were different in each interview for two reasons.

First, random questions are usually given in an informal way without a fixed order. Some questions are out of personal curiosity, which may not relate to this research. For instance, do you think being a journalist has any impact on your family life? This question was not asked in every interview, which depended on participants' attitude and way of speaking. According to my experience in Chinese culture it is not offensive, in certain cases, to ask about personal life. In contrast, it could be a tactful way to open the topic and offer them an opportunity to talk about the pressure they faced. Such a way of constructing dialogue also helps researchers to overcome the dilemma of being an outsider and makes researchers' role–shifting (outsider or insider) more flexible (Cui, 2015; Hubscher-Davidson, 2011). As one participant suggested, he had been suffering heavy depression in recent years after he transferred his role from being a journalist to an administrative position, mainly because of the pressures from the managerial workload. With a brief knowledge about their personal details, it is very helpful for me to understand their works and the way they talked about their works. So, this type of question may not be put forward in the same way in each interview.

Second, as shown in Table 3, participants were from different news organizations, in terms of platforms, sectors and backgrounds. The questions given to the journalists from online media organizations may not apply to whom were from traditional media organizations. For instance, how often is your reporting reposted and what is the amount as far as you know? Thus, semi-interviews were employed in a flexible way.

4.5.5.2 Adjusting interviewing strategies

Apart from flexibility in asking questions, I noticed that interviewing veteran journalists and young journalists requires very different strategies. Among Participants, six of them had more than 8 years working experience in journalism, whereas the rest were comparative novice journalists in this industry. When I interviewed those veteran journalists, I mentioned some information that I had been told by other participants, without exposing their identity. For example, I said, "… (but) some people would consider that not knowing the truth is better than knowing the fake truth. What do you think? […]". This was a useful strategy, which I used frequently for two reasons. As Kvale and Brinkmann (2009: 192) argued, "the interview is an inter-subjective enterprise of two persons talking about the common themes of interest." Thus, by introducing probes, I fostered my conversation with participants, especially when participants said they did not know how to answer questions. Such probes, in most cases, were the information about news production I obtained from other participants. Another reason is that it would not give my participants a strong feeling that I was an outsider without any experience in news

production. They would like to talk more if I demonstrated a little knowledge about their industry. Participant 18 even asked me about which news organization I worked for before.

Interviewing strategies need to be applied differently according to the characteristics of participants. When I interviewed young journalists, the strategy totally changed. I found that when I showed that I really lacked knowledge about news production, some participants, the novice journalists, wanted to talk more. I cannot generalize that every young journalist had this response, but at least seven participants did so. When I showed that I was confused about what they were saying, they were more likely to explain more about what they said.

As Abell and Myers write (2008: 155), “the gap between interviewer and interviewee can be an opportunity”. Indeed, I benefited from the gaps between me and them, an academic researcher and media professionals. These gaps helped me develop different strategies to approach my participants effectively. Compared with previous research, my research introduces new strategies about the role-building process when entering an esoteric field as an outsider. When the interviewer is a member of such a community, it is hard for them to observe the nuances of role building and strategies developing.

4.6 Consuming media

As mentioned earlier, recruiting interviewees involved online retrieving and profile searching of renowned journalists working in Beijing. Thus, it was very necessary to have a certain knowledge of their previous reporting or any other social activities.

Consuming media constantly provided me with background information in this research. For example, during my fieldwork, four participants were no longer working as investigative journalists as a fixed occupation. It was common among them that they deem themselves public intellectuals. Therefore, having a better understanding of their written work and experience gave me a contextual background for interviews.

During the second half year of 2017 I kept tracking on trending news and significant events on online and offline media. Apart from the holding of the 19th Party Congress, the majority of breaking news were social, crime, environmental, health, economic and educational news. On the one hand, I mainly spent time on searching the news topics which had been reported by my participants; on the other hand, I followed the hot-button issues on social networking. Although certain events were not breaking news for the mainstream media, they are the spotlights of public opinion, which journalists would investigate for its newsworthiness (Chapter Six). Briefly, I listed 10 breaking news reported by both mainstream media and prevalent on social media, some of which are mentioned as cases to clarify my findings in subsequent chapters. Evidently, as my research object focused on investigative reporting, most events were negative.

Table 4 Breaking news in Chinese media in 2017

Date	Event
22nd November	Needle abuse in Beijing kindergartens under RYB education
18th November	Big fire in Daxing district, Beijing
November	Suspect who killed a Chinese student in Japan on trial (2016)
October	Yuzhang school's scandal
7th September	Developer of WePhone app committed suicide
31st August	Pregnant female suicided in hospital several hours before labour in Shanxi province
12th August	Child molestation in Nanjing South Station
24th July	Sun Zhengcai, a senior officer of the Politburo, detained for bribery
14th July	Death of Li Wenxing and illegal funding in Tianjin
April	Self-defense or intentional injury: a loan shark was killed by a borrower's son after implementing sexual and violent humiliation over borrower

4.7 Analysing interview data

As noted by Davidson (2009), for some qualitative researchers, translating the transcripts could be a part of data analysis, because researchers have to decide how to unpack the meaning in the language. Instead of considering translation as a tool to carry out analysis, I argue that translation is an important stage of analysis. Therefore, analysing my interview data involves two parts: translating the transcripts, and analysing the transcripts. The open coding is based on Chinese transcripts then I

translated what I used in this thesis into English.

4.7.1 Translation and transcripts

The sample of analysis includes interview transcripts and the notes I took during interviews. All interviews were transcribed by myself manually, other than using computer-assisted software for two reasons. One is that most of the participants have different accents while speaking Mandarin. Another reason is more about culture and language, such as homophones occur frequently in Chinese (eg. “right” and “power” have the same pronunciation in Chinese). Moreover, some participants used idioms, the expressions circulated on the internet, and even gestures to express what they thought inappropriate to be recorded during the interview. Thus, doing transcripts manually is helpful to make sure the choices of “words” are apt for the context, by capturing the intonation, passion, pauses, and inflections (Crichton and Childs, 2005).

I did not translate all the transcribed interviews as the transcripts come to over 230,000 words in total. I did forward-translation myself. The back-translation was carried out by a friend, who is a PhD student in Cardiff University. Before he came to Cardiff, he worked as a daily journalist (political and financial) for 2 years in China. So, he had a certain amount of knowledge about news production in China. He only checked the translation that I used in this thesis.

For words that are hard to translate, such as slang, indigenous topos, idiom and esoteric common-sense, I translated according to the meaning, rather than using verbatim translation, as highlighting the contextual meaning in the source language is more important than looking at the “systematic meaning” in the process of translation

(Pym 2010). In Chinese-English translation studies, paraphrasing the source language has proved to be the most preferred method, especially for metaphorical expressions (Zheng and Xiang, 2014:18). Zheng and Xiang (2014:17-19) analyzed the errors that translators are likely to make while translating Chinese into English, which suggested that a certain cultural background knowledge is helpful in decoding the contextual meaning in the text/recording. Therefore, the analysis of indigenous language (slang and idiom) appearing in Chapters Five, Six and Seven is based on my paraphrased translation.

4.7.2 Coding the transcripts

As Kvale and Brinkmann (2009:197) suggest there are three models of interview analysis: focusing on meaning, language, and general analysis. I mainly focused on analysing the meaning as well as the language use of interviews. As further suggested by Kvale and Brinkmann (ibid), "analyses are more in line with a view of knowledge as socially constructed which focus on the language medium of the stories told." For the approach of meaning coding, the aim is to identify the meanings of words. Both approaches can be used interchangeably in open coding.

Basically, I used open coding which does not need to quantify the data (Glaser and Strauss, 1967 cited in Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009). "Open coding refers to the process of breaking down, examining, comparing, conceptualizing and categorizing data."(ibid) In this research, being data-driven is the major approach of coding, where the key concepts emerge by coding line by line. I coded the transcripts mainly regarding the key practices of participants. For instance, where did the sources come

from? I generate several codes like online (official media account, individual media accounts, forum, trending topic etc.), and offline (informants, media peers, activists, officials, NGOs etc.). Also, the findings in Chapter Six are based on some simple codes as well, such as the journalistic description of newsworthiness (in terms of public power, public interest and so on). These codes (Appendix 3) are used for analysing raw data, which helps me to know how Chinese investigative journalists understand newsworthiness in an indigenous manner, rather than using what has been developed in the existing western literature (Harcup and O'Neill, 2001; 2017). All these codes are around the key concepts I examine later.

However, coding transcripts with codes is not useful all the time. Morse (2020:2-3) said that on most occasions "we (researchers) force ideas into words as single 'codes' that fractionate data and are then reconstituted into patterns of dictionary similarity but entirely miss the meaning intended by our participants." Apart from what Morse (2020) argued, in my case, participants provided very different answers regarding the same interview questions. They answered questions from different dimensions based on very different expressions and concerns. For example, as participants were asked about the selection criteria of reporting (newsworthiness), participants provided a wide spectrum of answers, based on the specific topic they worked on. It shows that participants have a personal and individual orientation in news selection, except for the organizational guidelines. Such discrepancy among the journalists in this research is very important to know, in order to examine if the conventional understanding of investigative journalism is still

adaptable today. In terms of how such discrepancy influences my journey to the conclusion of this research, Chapters Five, Six and Seven will discuss that in detail.

Chapter Five: Placing Chinese Investigative Journalism

5.1 Introduction

This chapter discusses the notion of Chinese investigative journalism in terms of who the investigative journalists are and what they do. By analysing interview data, I argue that four perspectives contribute to the understanding of this journalistic group today, including journalists' perceptions of their role in society, the social contribution they make, the circulation and parameters of investigative reporting, and the boundaries between this group and those involved in daily journalism. All of these perspectives have been well researched (Tong, 2011; Wang, 2016; Repnikova, 2017), whereas, here, I discuss specifically how digital media changes journalists' perceptions of their work and status. All of these aspects lead to the way that journalists practice gatekeeping. First, investigative journalists in Beijing view their major role in society as that of information disseminators and interpreters due to the prevalence of misinformation and disinformation. Second, the journalists I studied do not consider the social contributions they make to be based on the notion of "speaking for the people" (Tong, 2011:46). Rather, they feel that their major social contribution is to provide credible and accurate information for the public with which to reach their personal goals because the motivations of sources are often questionable (see Chapter Six). Third, I suggest that digital media challenges the parameters of investigative reporting. Here, the parameters refer to the format, tone, topic and online circulation of investigative reporting in the digital age. Lastly, I find that the difference between investigative journalism and daily journalism is vague today. Daily journalists also

investigate public concerns. To sum up, the critical and adversarial nature of Chinese investigative journalism is diminishing. The critical nature that once characterized investigative journalists—scrutinizing the conduct of authorities and political elites—does not seem to characterize this journalistic group today due to the challenges arising from the way that the public uses digital media.

The purpose of this chapter is twofold: introducing who investigative journalists are in today's China and making connections between western literature of gatekeeping and the discussions how Chinese investigative journalism takes shape. Firstly, as suggested in the Chapter Three, gatekeeping theory not only refers to a set of practices how journalists process raw information into news, but also applies to explain the role perception of journalists (e.g. Hellmueller, 2017; Tandoc and Vos, 2016; Mellado et al., 2020). However extensive literature explained how investigative journalists perform their watchdog by applying quantitative surveys. In this chapter, elaborate a process of how Chinese investigative journalists identify the role and status of themselves in Chinese society nowadays, prior to analysing the exact gatekeeping practices of these journalists. Secondly, studies of Chinese investigative journalism demonstrates that the gatekeeping practices of journalists are constructed discursively. Current studies have argued extensively that journalism in China should be examined within the triangulation of the Party, market and digital technology (Tong, 2019; Wang, 2016). I engaged with those literature in Chapter Two and I will specifically discuss how these influential aspects bring changes to investigative journalism today regarding their role, their occupation, and their publication.

5.2 Defining Chinese investigative journalism in the digital age

This section provides my conclusions as to what investigative journalism in China is today. These conclusions combine what has been documented in previous scholarship and the changes that have occurred in investigative journalism in the digital age, according to my research.

5.2.1 Journalists' perceptions of their role in Chinese society

The main change in the way in which the sampled investigative journalists in my research perceive their role is that they consider providing in-depth information and interpretations of complicated public events to be more important than exposing the misconduct of authorities. Both roles have been included in previous research on role perception amongst Chinese journalists. Such a change can be observed in the first national survey of Chinese investigative journalists working for over 80 media organizations that took place during 2010 and 2011. Shen and Zhang (2013:379) note that "provid[ing] an analysis and interpretation of complex problems" is perceived as the primary role of investigative journalists. "Providing factual information for recent news events" and "helping people implement supervision by public opinion" tied for second (ibid.). Although previous research has noted how powerful investigative journalists were during their golden era (2003-2013) in terms of scrutinizing the conduct of officials, the survey results did not suggest they saw themselves as performing a critical role. Indeed, the tactics and strategies that investigative journalists applied in revealing the facts and resisting authority demonstrated their critical nature, according to the aforementioned survey result, but this critical nature

was not evident in every context for two reasons. First, journalism in China is an institutionalized mechanism under control of the Party (Repnikova, 2017). During Xi's presidency, the watchdog role of journalists has declined much more evidently than ever before (Tong, 2018). Second, providing credible and accurate information is viewed as the foremost role, a view that has been enhanced in the digital age.

According to Zhang and Cao (2017), providing reliable information and preventing the dissemination of rumours is much more urgent than carrying out media supervision. Being critical in investigative journalism has given way to investigating the facts. Particularly, individuals can subjectively omit facts concerning an event for personal reasons. One such example concerns a charity fraud event which occurred in 2016. A father wrote in his social media account that his 5-year-old daughter had been diagnosed with leukaemia and that he lacked money for her medical treatment, which attracted the attention of media organizations and drove the public to donate money. However, investigative journalists discovered that the father, belonging to the economic elite, had enough money to cover the medical expenses and that the family's medical insurance had already covered part of their expenses. In this case an ordinary man was able use the media to attract public attention and reach his personal goal. Participant 23 remarked that the role of mainstream media is nothing more important than checking facts and putting the fragmented information on social media together to demonstrate the whole picture of a news event. Even though, in some cases, the public can question the credibility of information, they are not able to verify

information (Participant 20). Rather, they are more likely to question the credibility of the mainstream media.

The majority of participants in this research agreed that their foremost social role is to deal with the chaos caused by the prevalence of social media and clarify the information available. Xu and Jin's study (2017) showed that both party journalists (including daily journalists) and Western-like journalists (watchdog journalists) in China consider the provision of facts and interpretations as their most basic role. Participant 12 told me about her experience in reporting the death of an undergraduate student, Li Wenxing, as the result of a pyramid scheme in Tianjin, which is a form of illegal funding: "as such a piece of breaking news occurred, much misinformation and disinformation spread from the portal media." This example also shows that journalistic engagement in investigating the facts is influenced by public opinion. A similar perception comes from Participant 16. He said that one of the key reasons for investigating a news event is to dispel the uncertainty of the public, which is considered the most basic role of investigative journalism today.

Although Chinese investigative journalists remain adversaries of the authorities and continue to assume a watchdog role, these characteristics are now second to the role they play in dissemination and interpretation. Investigative journalists make an effort to investigate what is covered for what reasons, according to Participant 11. People use social media to post their personal lives online for different reasons, and, from these personal reasons, political stances and psychological motivations of individuals can be discerned. Hence, the motivations of

individuals sharing their daily experiences and encounters are what journalists are interested in. As dissemination and interpretation become the most crucial roles journalists perform, their major contribution has shifted from scrutinizing the conduct of authorities to dispelling uncertainty. Under this scenario, there are no evident differences between investigative journalists and daily journalists, and this point will be discussed in the last section of this chapter (see 5.2.4). Although it is undeniable that the development of journalism in China is susceptible to the political climate, what the journalists I interviewed found most challenging was the disruptive force of digital media.

5.2.2 Social contributions of investigative journalism

The second way in which investigative journalism has changed concerns the social contribution it makes. Previous studies have emphasized that investigative journalism aims to represent the interests of vulnerable people (Tong, 2011; Hassid, 2016) and provoke changes in policy-making (Repnikova, 2017). Although the journalists I interviewed confirmed that they still try to make contributions in these areas, two subtle changes can be observed. One is that journalistic reporting can no longer make a significant contribution to policy changes. Namely, reporting that can force governmental departments to re-examine their conduct and provoke policy changes no longer constitutes a large percentage of investigative reporting. Rather, journalists are reporting more individual stories with implications for readers. In addition, in my research, the journalists suggested that reporting what is relevant to the public is different from speaking for vulnerable people. Providing accurate and credible

information in a timely manner is much more essential than representing the interests of individuals.

5.2.2.1 Decreasing contributions to policy change

Investigative journalists have made great contributions to policy and legislation, such as through reporting on the Sun Zhigang event (Luo, 2014; Repnikova, 2017) during the golden ten years of Chinese journalism (2003-2013). Journalistic reporting brings positive changes to the institutional settings and subsequently, the public benefits from these changes, which specifies the idea of the social contributions of investigative journalism. Today, it is becoming more and more difficult for journalists to provoke changes in policy. According to the participants, only a small number of the social issues they exposed had been addressed by the authorities in recent years. On the one hand, journalists have to spend a long time collecting facts and proving that people and their interests are being harmed. On the other hand, when a large number of social ills are exposed, the government can take a long time to solve them all. The case below will help explain why the reporting that can contribute to policy and institutional changes is diminishing.

Participant 18 once investigated the illegal disposal of a large amount of household trash into the Yangzi River, the longest river in China. Once this issue had been exposed, officials in the local provincial government devoted hundreds of policemen to cleaning up the river. However, whilst the government reacted to this media-exposed crisis, the propaganda department warned the news organizations to stop their follow-up reporting, according to Participant 18. Apart from pressure

exerted by orders from the Party, investigative journalists are very cautious when investigating such events for two reasons. First, as mentioned in the last chapter, there are political tensions between the central and provincial governments (Tong, 2010). The provincial government is not always controlled by the central government since the political elites at the local level can develop their own power within their administrative region. Some governments at the local level not only have influence over events occurring within their geographical regions but can also negotiate, or even disobey, an administrative order from the central government, as relayed by Participant 18.

Second, from the view of journalists, obtaining sufficient evidence with which to make a claim in their reporting is a complex process, especially in the case of scientific and environmental reporting. According to the participants (Participants 17, 18, 5), even though journalists are motivated to cover neglected public groups, obtaining evidence-based facts is more important. For them, providing solid evidence is more crucial than constructing eye-catching news stories. If journalists fail to obtain core evidence in the case of a news event, their news organizations would consider whether or not to investigate further (Participant 5). Additionally, as abundant homogenous cases occur, journalists have to select what to cover based on the worthiness of events (see Chapter Six). It is more likely that the public will see what is *unsolved*, rather than solved (Participants 18 and 25), as provincial governments make selective decisions to tackle environmental issues (Tang, Chen and Wu, 2018).

Also, time, political and economic pressures can constrain journalists from obtaining evidence-based facts.

All investigative journalists hope that their reporting can attract the attention of the power holders and benefit the public, but this process is rather intricate, as it involves the interests of political actors at different administrative levels, public demand, and the requirements and judgments concerning newsworthiness of the news organizations they work for (see 6.3.2). Participant 20 told me that the way news is produced is far more complicated that the public realizes. He said that journalists are frequently misunderstood by the public when they fail to report on events in the way that the public expects. In particular, when journalists do not use direct quotations from interviewees, these sources think that they do not speak for them and only serve officials. Participant 20 said, "I cannot include such accusing language in the reporting because there is no evidence to prove that." What concerns journalists the most is whether the evidence provided by sources is credible. Thus, there is a huge gap between the perceptions of journalists and the public on what (investigative) journalism does, and this gap influences journalistic attitudes towards the so-called "vulnerable social groups". Although this gap is seemingly stressful for journalists, journalists do confirm that it is more important today to evaluate source-provided information critically. This aspect will be specifically discussed in Chapter Seven when I discuss how journalists deal with sources and verification, but, in the following section, I will touch on why fewer and fewer journalists consider speaking for the public to be a social contribution that they can make.

5.2.2.2 Increasing contributions to credible information

Existing literature shows that Chinese investigative journalism is also seen as journalism that "speak(s) for the people in vulnerability" (Tong, 2011:18), namely vulnerable people. Investigative journalists have given themselves the mission of "representing the people" (Hassid, 2016:94). In doing so, their major social contribution aims at improving the lives of different social groups. The groups that investigative journalists often cover in their reporting are vulnerable and marginalized social groups living at the bottom of the society (Tong, 2011). Li and Sparks (2016) found that Chinese investigative journalists have shifted their reporting from monitoring the power holders to telling the stories of typical individuals and relaying the miserable experiences of the vulnerable. Although investigative journalists are careful to avoid criticizing the conduct of authorities directly, they will elaborate on why an individual's story is important for the public to know. This aspect is also mentioned by participants in my research. Participant 3 recounted his experience in reporting on the social issues that appeared after the implementation of the two-child policy in 2015. During his investigation, he found that the parents who planned to have a second child had to provide many documents to the civil department proving that they were eligible to have the child. This process was so time consuming that it could take months. Participant 3 said that he hoped that his reporting would draw the relevant governmental department's attention to this issue and reduce unnecessary procedures. In his reporting, he mentioned how difficult it was for the pregnant wife to travel between several governmental departments and for the husband to find and

collect different types of documents, including the marriage certificate of his grandparents. In this case, the journalists placed an emphasis on recounting individual experiences to demonstrate the social significance of this story and imply that this was not a single case.

Moreover, one more reason I suggested that it is hard to tell to what degree the individual stories circulating online are real or not is that, according to Participant 3, as digital media has empowered individuals to tell their stories online, journalists have come to care more about the motivations behind those stories than any sensational or thrilling plot elements. Participant 25 indicated that knowing why individuals post their unusual experiences is helpful for journalists in terms of uncovering more facts and related information. This process will be explained in Chapter Seven.

Another change in journalists' attitude towards making social contributions through their reporting can be observed among veteran journalists, who no longer hold the idea that they should "speak for the powerless". When I asked the participants what they thought about speaking for powerless people, I was challenged by many of them. It was a common perception among the participants, especially journalists who had been working for more than eight years in the industry, that investigative reporters should reconsider the idea of speaking for the vulnerable (Participants 10, 19, 16, 21). Participant 21 said, "I do not agree with the idea of speaking for the powerless". He went on to say that he had come across many cases of people who seemed to be victims of the powerful or grassroots heroes whose stories turned out to be problematic. "I think journalists should speak for the *time* (*shi dai*)

rather than individuals (any social actor).” What he means is that the stories that journalists investigate should be typical of society and symbolic enough in the current age to create a big picture demonstrating the value of news.

The evidence provided above suggests that the critical aspect of investigative reporting is experiencing challenges. Ten years ago, scrutinizing the authorities dominated investigative reporting, which was more or less conducive to political institutions. It gave investigative journalists a sense of honour. Today, journalists have become puzzled by the digitally-empowered public. They are confused about what counts as investigative reporting and how to perform their role. An in-depth discussion of these issues can be found in Chapter Six. Combined with the shift in their role, journalists’ major social contribution is to offer reliable information on, and decent explanations of, social events through grounded investigations. As investigative journalists are under institutional pressure, various content produced by the public becomes a challenge, undermining their concepts of investigative reporting.

5.2.3 Parameters, circulation and investigative reporting

The third aspect of change concerns the conventional understanding of what counts as investigative reporting in the pervasive digital environment (Yu, 2011). Such a change encompasses broad concepts, such as the tone of reporting (Stockmann, 2013), format of reporting (Wang and Lee, 2014) and textual characteristics of reporting (Ding, 2014). The circulation of reporting can be used to examine how the audience’s consumption of investigative reporting shapes journalists’ conceptions of their work.

5.2.3.1 Terms for, and forms of, investigative reporting

It is always a controversial task to define what investigative reporting is in Chinese journalism studies, and no unified definition exists. On the press card (*ji zhe zheng*) licensed by the SAPPRFT, a governmental credential for media practitioners, there is no indication that the holder is an investigative journalist and what kind of reporting activities they engage in. According to the definition given by CNCTST (2018:55), investigative reporting is "muckraking reporting". It refers to "a report that journalists compile through an in-depth investigation of a concealed fact/truth which is related to the public interest". However, the definition of investigative reporter refers to "a group of journalists receiving direct guidance and assignments from an editor-in-chief to accomplish difficult and time-consuming investigations, which are considered as important by journalists" (CNCTST, 2018: 52). Contradictions can be seen in existing research in that scholars use critical reporting, negative reporting, supervision by public opinion (*yulun jiandu*) and in-depth reporting to describe investigative reporting (Tong, 2018; Lee and Wang, 2014; Zhao, 2000). *Neican*, which was discussed by Participants 1 and 3, is also a type of investigative reporting (see 2.5.1).

In a survey of publications (N=126) produced in mainland China and overseas between 1982 and 2013, supervision by public opinion is used most frequently as an alternative term for investigative reporting (N=54) (Wang and Lee, 2014:222). In the Chinese publications, in-depth reporting (*shendu baodao*, N=30) is second to supervision by public opinion, where in-depth reporting means "a type of reporting in which journalists explore the important social events in order to present the facts from an in-depth and comprehensive perspective" (CNCTST, 2018:55).

Under this scenario, as I searched for investigative journalists in Beijing, there was no common understanding as to what forms of reporting this type of journalist engaged in. Participant 25 noted that he was sometimes suspicious of journalists engaged in muckraking, although common sense dictated that muckraking was good investigative reporting because it provided knowledge that was difficult for the public to access. In addition, two participants[24] said that they questioned the quality of some of the "muckraking reporting" done by media peers, particularly when they used anonymous sources. Another concern raised by Participant 16 involved the "ethical issues" of reporting (Lee, Cui and Zhang, 2015) miserable individual experiences in a grassroots society. Even though the public is eager for more information on particular types of news events, such as a female student enrolled at Peking University who was diagnosed with a rare disease, the ethical issues surrounding such stories bother journalists (Participant 16).

According to Ding (2014), the meaning of investigative reporting must be updated for the digital age because digital technologies challenge and reshape the public understanding of what is in-depth and what is important. Ding further suggests (2014) that any definition of in-depth reporting, as well as investigative reporting, has to capture the distinct knowledge and strategies that arise from reporting. As journalistic authority is being challenged by digital media (Tong, 2018), the legitimacy of investigative journalists has to rest on content and knowledge (and the

[24] These two participants hoped that I could avoid using what they said about their media peers in this study, so I did not specify who they were.

strategies that lead to that knowledge). Liu Wanyong (2019), a former editor-in-chief of investigative reporting for the *China Youth Daily*, feels that the Internet has impacted investigative reporting profoundly, especially in terms of sourcing exclusive news. What journalists can do to deal with this situation is to capture the significance of the news behind the superficial phenomenon of interest. This view is echoed by Participant 12.

5.2.3.2 Numbers, social impacts and investigative reporting

The second aspect addressed in this category was inspired by my field work because I did not expect that investigative journalists would consider the circulation of their reporting on digital media to be one of the parameters that should be used in examining the social impact of their reporting. Journalists value the social impact of reporting (previously referred to as social contribution), whereas the public and news organizations value the circulation of journalistic reporting. Participant 25 told me that digital media, such as web portals and news aggregators, have an extremely strong impact on the public's understanding of investigative reporting. "In-depth reporting does not mean reports of more than 10,000 words or covering several printed pages. It should be measured by the impact of reporting." In terms of measuring the impact of reporting, he said that one way to do so is to examine the social contribution of reporting and another way to do so is to check the circulation of reporting on digital platforms.

As the social contribution was discussed earlier, circulation will be considered here. First, when considering circulation, the number of online viewers, namely, the

click rate, is important. Four participants mentioned that 100,000+ viewers is a symbolic number in terms of measuring the impact of reporting circulated on WeChat. With encouragement from the central government, most news organizations, for instance, *China Youth Daily*, *Southern Weekly* and *Beijing Youth Daily*, have created official accounts on major social media platforms in China (Cui and Lin, 2015). Subscribers to these media organizations can read and forward the latest reporting to their personal social networks, which makes a statistical contribution. I was asked many times by my participants to forward their reporting to my social network. On the one hand, journalists hope to enlarge the impact of their reporting via larger audiences; on the other hand, this numeric index is an important reference for checking their work. In the Western context, Kormelink and Meijer (2018) find that both journalists and their organizations treat web metrics seriously and find them an important approach for observing audiences' consumption of their media contents. When I asked the participants if there were any requirements from the editors-in-chief regarding the number of viewers, journalists' responses were vague. However, they did admit that 100,000+ viewers is an important distinction for them, especially the younger journalists.

The second way to measure the circulation of reporting is to see if it turns up on mobile devices as pop-up news. Any reporting which is perceived as being important, thrilling or shocking will be forwarded by major news aggregators and news webs, such as *Today's Headline*, *Yidian zixun, Netease News,* and the *Beijing Times*. The editors of these online news platforms will push the reporting into the top

line on the web page if it is popular. This reporting then reaches the public through pop-up windows on mobile devices. Participant 25 stated that "one of my reports once obtained 800,000+ comments on *Netease*, let alone the click rate". He showed me his phone while we talked about this. Although the journalists that I interviewed said that they should not be overly obsessed with numbers, the digital impact on the popularity of reporting has already been integrated into the criteria of evaluating the quality and importance of journalistic reporting. Hence, even investigative journalists are not free from looking for the news topics that the public is looking for.

5.2.4 The boundary between investigative journalism and daily journalism

The final perspective is the boundary between investigative journalism and daily journalism. Tong's (2011:13) pioneering study of Chinese investigative journalism suggests that investigative reporting is very different from daily journalism because investigative journalism is more aggressive and requires more sources. Although it is undeniable that investigative journalists in China have the duty to challenge the powerful, from my observations in this research, the boundary between investigative journalism and daily journalism has started to blur in terms of topics and investigative procedures.

5.2.4.1 Topics of investigative reporting

The topics that investigative journalists and daily journalists report on are virtually indistinguishable. The journalists who were once daily reporters and are now investigative reporters said that both kinds of reporting care about public interest and public power (Participant 6, 10, 25). Apart from the daily reporters who write

propaganda news and positive news, there are those who report on what is relevant to the public interest. According to Participant 6, what is relevant to the public is at the centre of daily journalists' reporting in the political arena. As a daily journalist, she said she scrutinized the conduct of officials at the municipal level regarding the use of official cars, namely, how these officials abused their access to official cars and wasted official resources.

Another reason for the blurring boundary between investigative reporting and daily reporting is the shortage of people in investigative or in-depth reporting departments in news organizations. As noted previously, the number of investigative journalists has declined significantly (Li and Sparks, 2016). Furthermore, there is no clear line establishing what type of journalists should specialize in what form of reporting. Investigative journalists can write both brief news articles and in-depth analyses of breaking news for print or online outlets. This is a change that occurs on a routine level, but it impacts how journalists understand their work individually. A journalist working for a weekly magazine with an online news website said that journalists not only need to write news for their online outlets, but they also need to carry out in-depth investigations every month. Participant 12 said:

> There are mainly three types of reporting I did: one is reporting the daily occurrences and publishing online; the second type is longer online reporting and reports on something urgent, like important breaking news; the last type is what is published in the magazine and normally requires at least 6,000 words. It could reach 10,000 words sometimes.

Participant 22 said that the organizational requirements for reporting published in printed media are much higher than for what is published online, as they can delete

online content as soon as mistakes are spotted. When the reporting goes to the printed outlet, journalists have to be more meticulous.

5.2.4.2 Investigative procedures

Investigative journalism and daily journalism also have similarities in terms of the core steps used in reporting. Participant 8, who was a daily journalist at the time of the interview but once was an investigative journalist, said that even though governmental departments release the information about breaking news at different kinds of news conferences, journalists still have to conduct fact-checking. Two participants (8 and 10) who had worked as daily journalists previously said they viewed themselves as examples of another kind of "investigative journalist" because facts can be found only through investigation. Moreover, especially when breaking news occurs, both daily journalists and investigative journalists have to arrive at the scene and cooperate with each other to carry out the investigation.

In this situation, few investigative journalists said that being critical or acting as advocates constituted the major differences between themselves and daily journalists. It is possible that investigative journalists have taken being critical for granted in their jobs for so long that they are not aware of acting in this manner. Apart from political reasons, I identified two reasons for participants' comments. First, as mentioned previously, most of the investigative journalists I encountered had no fixed reporting field. The declining number of journalists has also resulted in a situation whereby investigative journalists have to keep an eye on everything relevant to the public interest (Participant 19). Second, good cooperation between an investigative

reporting department and a daily news department can enhance the competitiveness of news organizations (Participant 9 and 17). This cooperation increases the immediacy of the reporting and competitiveness with other media peers (Shoemaker and Reese, 2014). Participants (6, 19 and 10) suggested that, although it could be the case that daily and investigative journalists in the same organization are competitors at times, when faced with the pressure of releasing news in a timely manner to compete with their media peers, they are more likely to cooperate with each other to gather information.

5.3 Conclusion

This chapter has looked at how investigative journalism in China differs from the investigative journalism examined in previous studies from four prominent perspectives. It argues that investigative journalists have become less critical and decreased their advocacy in terms of their perceived role in society, what contributions they make to the public, the way that investigative reporting is framed and circulated, and the boundary between them and daily journalists. The changes in these four perspectives demonstrate an evident relation with the prevalence of digital media. Due to the fact that digital media has become the way in which the public consumes and shares information, the investigative journalists sampled in this research were more likely to consider themselves as disseminators of accurate information and interpreters of complicated issues, thus underlining their current major social contribution of providing credible information and knowledge to the public. The role of scrutinizing the powerful now occupies second place. Under this

scenario, the boundary between investigative journalists and daily journalists is not as distinct as it was before. Tong (2017) once argued that Chinese investigative journalism has been tamed by the combined force of the political, economic and technological sectors. It is true that such a combined force is a powerful challenge. This chapter, however, not only explores this challenge and others from a journalistic perspective, but also discusses to what degree these combined challenges have altered the conventional understanding of Chinese investigative journalism in a world in which the public has become a force that can rival political control of the production and distribution of information. The implications emerged from the interview data show the transition of journalistic perception of their job is driven by the changing practices of the public from bottom-up, which echoes the argument I made in Chapter Two that digital media significantly empowers the public. More importantly, what is accompanying such transition is how journalists understand their performance in the process of gatekeeping. We are extensively acknowledged by literature that investigative journalism in whatever context is a distinct type of journalism for its criticism on powerful elites, but my observation showed that these journalists in China highlighted the primary role of journalists as disseminators and interpreters. In other words, when Chinese investigative journalism once deemed as quality journalism during the golden years and journalistic judgement of newsworthiness has priority over the factors at other levels in the hierarchical model, investigative reporting was strongly characterized as critical and negative reporting (De Burgh, 2003). The information relating to public interest and corruptions of officials was

more likely to pass the gate and to be processed as news. Today, the entrance of what information could pass the gate is narrower than before, because more and more topics were identified as sensitive under the tightened control of the Party. Also, the taste of the public of news consumption has become a key factor working at the gate. I will elaborate this in the next chapter.

In conclusion, according to Zhao, "without doubt, the news media system in China is in a state of great flux" (Zhao, 1998:10). She contends that Chinese media and journalism are "far from a monolithic and unified propaganda machine […] it can be characterized as a multifaceted creature undergoing a process of rapid transformation, with different parts of the body straining in different, even opposite, directions" (Zhao, 1998:10). Although this argument was made 20 years ago, it still explains the ongoing developments in Chinese journalism well. As the vaccine scandal showed in the introduction, Chinese journalism is experiencing many challenges caused by non-state powers, and these powers are grappling with each other to reshape the academic, empirical and even folk understanding of journalism practitioners in an intangible manner. Extensive studies have contributed to the discussion of the impact of political economy on investigative journalism in China, and this research has no intention to downplay such impact. However, it argues that the digital presence immerses investigative journalists in a disruptive environment which is making them less critical than ever before. Because such a situation has been explored widely in Western societies, this research zooms in on Chinese investigative journalism. As this chapter provides indications about the ways in which Chinese

investigative journalism is being challenged by digital media, the next two chapters will explain how these challenges constitute gatekeeping practices and how journalists deal with the predicaments in which they find themselves.

Chapter Six: Discovering the News and Identifying the "Public"

6.1 Introduction

This chapter introduces how Chinese investigative journalists select what stories to cover and the constraints they experience. It argues that, because investigative journalists are constrained by organisational demands to cover online trending topics to attract audiences, they try to maintain the quality of their in-depth reporting by emphasizing the public interest involved in those trending news events. This argument suggests that economic interests can drive what journalists select and report, according to the demands of their organizations. However, more importantly, what is reflected from the online news agenda is a trend of tabloidization.

According to the perceptions of investigative journalists in my study, fewer people consume quality news, with the user-generated content circulated online becoming a major alternative news source for the public. Such user-generated content not only draws the audience's attention away from quality news, but also cultivates the audience's tastes towards tabloidization and vulgarisation in the long term. In response, journalists' decisions on what raw information can pass the "gate" and become news is a negotiated result between organizational demands for economic gain, the online news agenda and the public relevance of the topic. Faced with this situation, although investigative journalists perceive covering stories of public interest as their foremost concern, organisational constraints, economic demands and audience

preferences have come to share the same importance whilst journalists select news. No aspect has supremacy over others.

This chapter first provides a brief review of the extant literature relating to constraints and controls over journalistic practices at the organizational level. Second, it introduces how organizational demands on journalists to cover hot-button issues have become a constraint on news selection. It then introduces how digital media has become disruptive for journalists making judgements on newsworthiness. Third, this chapter examines what "the public" means to the sampled journalists and how they react to the constraints identified above.

6.2 Organizational constraints on news production in China

Organizational influences on news production are differently constructed in the Chinese context. In Chinese journalism, organizational influence is often explained as a form of the Party's political control over journalists. The media in China are widely acknowledged to be in the grip of the Communist Party (Brady, 2008; Zhao, 2000). The Party's control over media contents and its circulation is put into effect through the editors-in-chief of the news organizations (Zhou, 2000). The orders and controls given to journalists by the editors-in-chief not only represent the interests of news organizations, but also, more importantly, carry the ideological guidance of the Party's propaganda department (CPD). According to this logic, organizational influence on journalists' practices is mirrored by the political control of organizations to a certain degree.

The introduction of marketization into the media landscape (see Chapter Two) further complicates the organizational influence on news-making (He, 2003). On the one hand, journalists have to maintain their role of being the mouthpiece of the Party; on the other hand, news organizations encourage journalists to adopt a business role (Wang and Sparks, 2019a; see 2.4.3.2). Yet research seldom explores the concrete impact of organizational influence on news production, because economic goals and political coercions are treated as an overarching force shaping the development of the media and journalism in China. For instance, Tong (2011) characterizes the organizational influence on investigative journalists as a pressure on journalists to avoid conflicts of interest with editors and other news departments. Conflicts of interest here refer to both economic conflicts of interest between the investigative reporting departments and other news-producing departments of an organization, and also political conflicts of interest (Tong, 2011).

Literature suggested that although not everyone in a newsroom can be gatekeeping (Tandoc, 2014), from the aspects of routine and organizational analysis, gatekeeping takes effect in a networked environment, which means organizational guidelines, principle and regulations connect editors, journalists and other newsworkers in the same site. Deciding what information is eligible to pass the gate is a collective decision made by journalists, editors in different hierarchical ranks and department directors, although journalists can convince their editors to minimise the political sensitivity of the news topics they want to cover. As He (2003) notes, the newspaper organization in China can be treated as a site to reduce the incongruity

between the Party's bureaucratically constructed ideological control and individual journalists' desire to make their own decisions on what to cover. Li (2011) observes that in magazines, too, deciding what to cover can be a reconciliation of journalists' professional aspirations and commercial interests. Thus, as suggested by the literature, capturing the nature of organizational influences on journalists needs to take into account the political-economic structure of the Chinese media system from the top-down.

Nevertheless, as news production has entered the information age, digital media has complicated the ways in which organizational influence exerts pressure on news production. A comparative study from Shoemaker, Johnson, Seo and Wang (2010) shows that online readers' news preferences are an important parameter for journalists to decide what to report and what to construct as "newsworthy". By sampling the news from China, Brazil and the US, Shoemaker et al. (2010) notice that in China what readers are interested in is the reporting that is less politically focused but more fact-based. Readers' news tastes can therefore serve to prompt news organizations to adjust their market orientation.

Cui and Lin (2015) find that although news organizations in China encourage journalists to use microblogging in their work, especially to enlarge the impact of their reporting, few journalists do so. The only principle that news organizations specified on the journalistic use of social media was to "comply with [political] control and play safe with new technology" (Cui and Lin, 2015:366). In this scenario, organizational influences on journalists' news selection still emphasize the role of

political censorship and economic incentives. Research that clarifies what role the new organization plays to regulate journalistic practices is currently lacking. Many studies treat news organizations as agencies to practice political decision-making on news production from a top-down view. Organizational influences are often framed as conflicts of interest between journalists' judgements on what is socially useful to cover and directors' decisions on what is economically valuable to cover. The following section will explain how organizational influence has been complicated by the introduction of digital media and how this negotiated result has impacted journalists' decisions on what to report.

6.3 Organizational demands to increase revenue

The demand to increase revenue is an organizational factor that complicates news selection among Chinese investigative journalists. Recent research has found that a number of Chinese newspaper groups have adopted a range of business strategies to promote their economic gains (Wang and Sparks, 2019a). Although this is also confirmed in my research, I suggest that economic interest is only one facet of the organizational constraints placed upon investigative journalists. More importantly, the tabloid-quality and sensational information circulating on digital media has cultivated the audience's tastes, making it hard for journalists to seek out quality news or source-provided information.

This challenge has arisen in such a way that investigative journalists are now, to a certain degree, forced by their organizations to cover news events that will attract the attention of the audience. Covering such news events is usually demanded by

department editors, who can assign journalists to investigate such events, even though journalists are reluctant to cover these simply to please the audience. This is because investigative journalists devote themselves to producing quality content in the public interest rather than gratifying public taste. As mentioned by Participant 18, it was not unusual for them to report something they did not want to:

> For a certain amount of the reporting we did, it did not necessarily have much newsworthiness [meaningfulness] to justify investigating it, but journalists can still make that a piece of investigative news to fulfil the assigned workload. We certainly want to write some good stories and do influential reporting, but journalists have to deal with their workload by reporting something that is maybe not that important [to society].

Such reporting with less social significance is deemed "fake in-depth reporting", Participant 18 commented referring to reporting with lower quality controls and significance, although journalists do invest efforts to investigate and write these stories. The official explanation of this journalism phenomenon is the "abridging of news values" and the poor economic status of news organizations is one of its causes (CNCTST, 2018:8). As previous research demonstrates, investigative journalists in China are strongly affiliated with in-depth and informative reporting, which means they report significant public issues to their audience (De Burgh, 2003). However, today, they are under more pressures from the economic demands of news organizations to investigate eye-catching events.

The interview material suggested that journalists from both commercial-oriented media organizations and the Party's official news organizations experienced such economic pressures from their organization. No substantial difference can be

observed regarding this; in fact, little variance exists. The journalists who work for weekly magazines (Participants 5, 11, 12) told me that everyone was assigned a workload per month. A novice journalist (Participant 5) said that she had to finish ten pieces of short reporting (2,000-3,000 words) and one of in-depth reporting (around 6,000 words) every month. Short reporting would be released on the news website and the in-depth reporting would be published on the printed magazines. The reporting published in printed magazine normally required a higher degree of quality than the short piece published on the website, because it was easier to react or amend the reporting published online, if any mistakes were spotted. When the interview took place, she told me she and one of her colleagues had just completed a piece of in-depth reporting about the administrative issues of a wildlife zoo in China.

Participant 12, an environmental investigative journalist also based in a leading commercial media organization in China, was very proud of the organization she worked for because their editors did not force them to report on trending topics. "Our leaders do not ask us to follow the trends, in-depth reporting is what they want to see." Nevertheless, novice journalists will normally receive more assigned investigations. On the one hand, it takes time for a novice to become familiar with the organizational structure, market orientation and writing style, so novices have to do their reporting under supervision from the editor or veteran journalists, who assign them work (Participant 5).

Veteran journalists, on the other hand, will have gained a greater degree of trust from their organizations to investigate what they consider to be newsworthy and

turn a tip into news (Participant 24 and 25), so they are less likely to be constrained by assigned investigations of "hot-button" (topical) issues. In a newspaper group, Participant 25 said, if he can conduct ten pieces of investigative reporting, two pieces are assigned by editors, on average. The variance among news organizations in their market orientation is one of the reasons leading to differences among journalistic perceptions of organizational pressure, but no one can deny that investigative journalism is struggling to survive today due to economic reasons.

Participant 16, a former investigative journalist and now an editor at an online commercial media group, told me that he was asked to carry out follow-up reporting of a news event that he considered worthless. He said:

> As the death of Su Xiangmao, an application programmer suspected of committing suicide after experiencing marriage fraud, became headline news in most Chinese media, our organization leader urged me to arrange for journalists to investigate this issue. I said that I would rather resign than cover the story. It did not warrant investigative reporting.

His reason for refusing is that he considered the event had no evident social implications. "This is not a news event about law or judicial matters," he said, "and the police did not set up this 'so-called' marriage fraud as a case to investigate. Even the most unbiased person cannot judge domestic affairs. What is my role of reporting this?"

It is common for journalists and leaders to hold different opinions about what is newsworthy, but Participant 16 said that there was a bottom line that they should insist on at least. "Evidenced by several screenshots from WeChat, some media considered Su's ex-wife as a cheater marrying Su for his money. Who gave the media

the right to judge a person in this way?" he asked. Investigative journalists are different from propaganda journalists, because by reporting what is important to society, they also propose solutions and critical viewpoints for authorities to make judgements. All of this should be based on solid evidence obtained from journalists' personal in-depth investigations, rather than by following the public's judgement on news events. "I hope the audience can tell the social values we propose. Although we cannot force the audience to accept such values, at least we delivered what we considered as important for them to know." This is what the bottom line of investigative reporting means to Participant 16.

This is not the only example among my participants where journalists would argue with their superiors or editors about covering trending topics for economic gains. Participant 14, a journalist working for a Party's official newspaper, said that he had no idea why certain news stories could become pieces of investigative reporting until he had finished writing, because until that point he could not see the bigger issues behind the phenomenon. Even though all the journalists I sampled were investigative journalists, I observed a degree of variance in journalists' perceptions on how to construct the newsworthiness of trending topics. Journalists from different organizations shared very different opinions on how to cover events, and what aspect of these events to emphasize. This variance could be due to individual experience or the specified areas in which the journalists worked.

In my study, the conflict between them and their organizations' leaders was mostly caused by the economic interests, as well as what has been suggested in

previous studies that journalists negotiated with editors mainly about the political sensitivity of news topics. This can be seen from the journalists' changing attitudes towards the Party's censor on their reporting. As aforementioned in Chapter Two, once journalists know what are tabooed topics, they will be less likely to touch those subjects. This will be examined in greater depth in the next chapter.

As stated by Participant 18, "every journalist wants to report something like 'Watergate event', but we experience many constraints. Influential reporting is not easy; you need good luck and good timing." A case study of *China Youth Daily* shows that the Party's official newspaper applies journalistic techniques to sensationalize news content, which is introduced as "popular official" media (Wang, Sparks and Yu, 2018). Scholars have suggested this as a positive trend: that the contents of popular journalism appear in the Party's official newspaper and reflect the audience's interest. It demonstrates a combination of broadsheet newspaper and tabloid styles (Huang, 2016). Nevertheless, according to the responses from participants in my study, I do not hold a positive attitude towards this trend. Indeed, increasing the proportion of sensationalized and personalized content can dilute the percentage of propaganda reporting, but watchdog journalism would not benefit from this transition.

As investigative journalism is distinctively characterized by uncovering the illness of society and misconduct of powerful elites no matter whether in China or elsewhere in the world (De Burgh, 2003), it has been taken for granted that this type of journalism is liable to come under threat from political power. In this context, the importance of "fact" comes from the overarching principle in Chinese journalism of

"seeking truth from facts" (Latham, 2000; Maras and Nip, 2015), which will be discussed specifically in Chapter Seven that how the journalists I interviewed verified facts and approached the truth. Here, my highlight is that, compared with this political reality that the Party's influential power of covering "the very fact" (see Chapter Two), challenges on investigative journalism brought by digital media take place in an intangible manner, which shape the audience's behaviours, and then force journalists to adjust their reporting aims and strategies.

Participant 25 remarked that even though it is hard for journalists to promote political changes in society, investigative reporting should at least inform the society with "hard facts" and no exaggerations. As the number of investigative journalists has decreased drastically over recent years, faced with the economic pressures, journalists still try their best to "gatekeep" the quality of their reporting and the interests of the public are still at the centre of their consideration. The next section introduces how journalists identify newsworthiness, and public relevance among the trending topics online.

6.3.1 Online news agenda and audience's news tastes

This section argues that the tabloidization of the online news agenda is another disruptive force for journalists making judgements on what is newsworthy, one which can rival the economic constraints. Such a constraint is rooted in the increasing prevalence of digital media. As the online public has been increasingly immersed in a digital environment full of tabloid information, it has become harder for investigative journalists to regain the public's attention on quality reporting. For the notion of

"public" in this research, I adopt Jia's interpretation of "online public" (2019:28), which means the whole population online, "regardless of their socio-economic position". For the concept of an online news agenda, research rarely uses it with a clear definition in Chinese studies, so I will state my own notion of it. I explain the online news agenda as one incorporating the online public (opinion) agenda, policy agenda and media agenda (Luo, 2014:1294); these categories cover the news agenda on social media, the Party's official media and commercial media in China respectively. This explanation covers most of the discussions in the existing literature (Luo, 2014; Stockmann and Luo, 2017; Guo, 2019; Xiao, 2011; Jia, 2019; Tang, Chen and Wu, 2018).

Recent research indicates that commercial news websites such as *Sohu*, *Netease*, and *Sina* are the most effective in setting the online news agenda in China (Guo, 2019). Relying on sensational language and narrative structures, profit-driven news websites are popular among their targeted audiences (Meng, 2018; Guo, 2019). These commercial websites also use social media accounts to disseminate their content and interact with their audiences.

Nearly half of the participants clearly stated that they were confused by the news tastes of the public today (Participants 6, 16, 17, 18, 8, 11, 7, 20, 21, 10, 14), and this can be observed from the news agenda on influential social media platforms in China. Participant 20 said it has become an important part of his personal life to browse Weibo and WeChat on a daily basis. By looking at and searching for news tips in a vast pool of information, two participants (17 and 20) commented that they were

clearly aware of the widening gap between their judgment on newsworthiness and what the public wants to read. Previous research in a Western context has shown that the readership of investigative reporting, namely the readership of quality news, is not as wide as the readership of soft news because of its "negativity" and ability to be "scathing" (Zaller, 2003), even though investigative reporting is characterized by a high degree of relevance to the public interest (De Burgh, 2008). In contrast to the West, investigative reporting was once a form of news that attracted audiences and was successfully turned into profit by media organizations from the late 1990s onwards (Zhao, 1998).

Yet, today, investigative reporting has lost this advantage. Participant 20 said that the tightened political censorship was only one of many causes of this. He said, "the [reporting of the] internet-based media [digital media] is what should be blamed; for instance, [when] Yu Huan killed a loan shark who insulted Yu's mother for an hour claiming self-defense." When this event took place in February 2016, it did not arouse great attention among Chinese netizens. The intensive discussion started in March 2017, when netizens began calling for "not guilty", after Yu was given a life-sentence. Then, *Southern Weekly* reported this. Participant 20, who formerly worked for *SW*, said:

> In the beginning, we did not expect that this event would trigger such a huge volume of discussion online […] As some commercial portal media, news aggregators and social media started to forward this news and changed the title into a sensational one, it was [clear that] the tactic of commercial packaging made this news go viral.

Participant 16 also mentioned this case; from the perspective of an investigative

journalist who specialized in law and criminal news, he thought the value of this case was how to define justifiable defense and undue defense in the legislative procedures. "I think this news event cannot be simpler, from a journalistic viewpoint," he said. However, from the perspective of audience, the reason they consumed this piece of news was the sensational plot reproduced by digital media users that Yu's mother had been sexually insulted by the loaner in front of Yu. The description of such a plot was one of the catalysts for this event capturing the audience's attention. Participant 16 continued:

> Another reason this case became popular, I think, is the conflict between ethics and law, but such ethics-law relation has been already explored in the ancient times of China. Like what is told in the novel, *Water Margin*[25], when someone hurts my family, I can kill that person. But we are in a civilized world now, why we still talk about this? I do not know why this case can trigger internet trolling and many people calling for freeing Yu Huan. They are legal-illiterates!

Here, this journalist reckoned that the low level of legal knowledge among digital media users was an important reason why they found the events so sensational and thrilling.

While Chinese netizens benefit from a great flow of information, investigative journalists have become worried about the quality of the information circulating online. Since 2010, the Party has taken a series of actions to regulate the "vulgar

[25] "Considered one of the Four Great Classical Novels of Chinese literature, *Water Margin* (*shui hu zhuan*) is written in vernacular Chinese rather than Classical Chinese. The story, set in the Song dynasty, tells of how a group of 108 outlaws gather at Mount Liang (or Liangshan Marsh) to form a sizable army before they are eventually granted amnesty by the government and sent on campaigns to resist foreign invaders and suppress rebel forces." Available at: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Water_Margin (accessed on 15 February 2020).

contents[26]" of news media (*People's Daily*, 2011). Vulgar content, also called the "three vulgarities," include emotional descriptions of news events, sensitive plots and using accusatory language in news narratives (CNCTST, 2018:234). In the news event mentioned above, the focus of audiences mostly zoomed in on the plot/developments of the event and Yu's act was interpreted as showing filial obedience to his mother, suggested by the journalist as one of the fine traditions in Chinese culture. Such a story does not necessarily warrant investigative reporting, because this is not what journalists hope to encourage, solving private issues in a violent manner. In contrast to audiences, journalists make judgments on what is newsworthy to the public from their stance as media professionals. As a veteran investigative journalist (Participant 16) specializing in reporting law and judicial issues suggested, the social values he interpreted from Yu's self-defence were different from the audience's perception of them. "Although we need to cater for the audience's tastes sometimes, because they are the people we rely on for our living, *not* every piece of reporting should be like that," he said.

It may still be insufficient to conclude that commercial strategies used to market news on digital media necessarily nurture audience's tastes for vulgarity and tabloidization, but, from a journalistic viewpoint, such a trend negatively impacts on

[26] "Three vulgarity (*san su*)" also can be translated into "vulgar productions and kitsch". It initially refers to a campaign about anti-vulgarity in talk show, drama and other art performances in 2006. Then, this is used to "lash out and boycott the publications with gossip, sensational stories that advocate money worship and consumerism." (*China Daily*, 10 Aug. 2010) Available at: http://language.chinadaily.com.cn/news/2010-08/10/content_11128716.htm (accessed on 13 April 2019).

the development of quality journalism, since digital media, especially on social networks, has emerged for commercial reasons (Stockmann and Luo, 2017).

Participant 6 stated, “it [the development of Chinese journalism] seems to have gone back to the age of tabloidization.” It makes sense that vulgar content has continued to appear in tabloids, but if quality media has begun to adopt this approach and style, it is regressing. Participant 15 told me that he would avoid including such sensational content in his reporting. “If I investigated the downfall of an official and I found out he had many mistresses, I would not exert great effort to verify that,” he said, because this was not what investigative journalists should cover in their reporting.

Participant 17 said he was extremely depressed about the trend of tabloidization. Regarding the fact that the amount of views on digital media is an important parameter for journalists to measure the social impact of their reporting, Participant 17 said, “regarding some meaningful and informative coverage I did, the amount of viewers was just 2,000 and among this 2,000 viewers, many of them were media peers!” Investigative journalists should not be bothered by numbers, “but it [quantifying the quality of investigative reporting] gave me a sense of loss.” This must especially be the case for those who have just entered the industry, Participant 17 said. He commented that nothing is more apposite than describing this age as “amusing ourselves to death”. In spite of the fact that this journalist (Participant 17) had only worked as an investigative journalist for two years in a press group, he was deeply aware of the disruptive power of digital media:

> There are no restrictions for self-(publishing) media users to write news in terms of language. What they need to do is just add an eye-catching title and combine what has already been published on different media. Then they rapidly get 100,000+ [viewers].

To conclude this section, through engaging with investigative journalists, I find there is a widening gap between journalists' and audiences' perceptions of the importance of news. From a journalistic perspective, such a discrepancy is mainly caused by the tabloidization of the public's news tastes and the circulation of sensational content on digital media cultivating such tastes in the long term. As Participant 14 stated, "in many cases, the popularity of news has no relevance to the journalist-perceived social significance of news, and valuable news may not catch the attention of the public." Such a trend can be observed in the amount of viewers of their reporting and what is published on digital media.

6.3.2 Identifying public relevance

The previous two sections discussed how the news agenda on popular social media became a disruptive force for journalists pursuing quality reporting and how such disruption has combined with organizational demands of increasing economic gains, worsening the situation within which investigative journalists have to work. In this section, I argue that, faced with these challenges, the solution for journalists to maintain the quality of their investigative reporting is to "see big from small (*yi xiao jian da*)", or identify the relevance of topics with different interpretations of what counts as "public". This section starts by explaining what types of "public" investigative journalists frequently cover, and then follows a discussion of what strategies journalists can apply.

In a general context, De Burgh (2008) finds that it is hard to develop a set of newsworthiness criteria for investigative reporting because investigative journalists have their own judgements regarding the priority they give to covering different types of news events in different cultures. What is commonly emphasized in the literature of investigative journalism in both Western and Chinese contexts is the importance of a "public" (Wang, 2016; Ettema and Glasser, 1998). Although investigative journalism in China bears little relation to democracy, it sees the interest of the "public" as vital (De Burgh, 2003). However, existing research does little to clarify who this public is from the point of view of investigative journalists. In the academic discourse of Chinese studies, "the public" is alternatively used with "the people" and "the masses" (Hassid, 2016; Tong, 2011). These alternative translations sometimes assume that ordinary people in Chinese society are the public (Hassid, 2016; Wang, 2016); sometimes, historically, the term "people" also incorporates intellectuals and professionals; politically, "people" refers to the passive construction of the public by government; socioeconomically, "people" carries the meaning of "anti-elite rhetoric" (Song, Lu, Chang and Huang, 2017:342). None of these interpretations explicitly signify which people count as the public and what types of public-related issues are covered in the context of investigative journalism.

All of my participants mentioned this idea of the "public (*gong*)" as one of the overarching principles behind their news selection strategies. According to Rizzo (1994:600), "*gong*" was first introduced into China with the notion of the "public sphere." Rizzo's study (ibid) suggests "*gong*" has four interpretations in Chinese: a

"cosmological principle of order, moral principle of order among human beings, the principle of political order, [and] land ownership." Such interpretations have also been adopted in the context of Chinese journalism. With regard to the participants in this study, "the public" has three meanings. Participant 14 showed me an excerpt of a document he used for lecturing novice journalists in his organization: "Foremost, newsworthiness concerns the public: public powers (*gong quan li*), the public (*gong zhong*, referring to people), public events (*gonggong shijian*)." (Further data on how journalists think about newsworthiness is attached in Appendix 3.)

The power relations of newsworthiness have already been studied widely in both Chinese and Western contexts. Zhao (2000:580) concludes that "official corruption, excessive exploitation of peasants, fraud and smuggling, mismanagement of state enterprises, violation of citizen and consumer rights by local officials and businesses and problems in education, housing, healthcare and housing reforms have been persistent themes in investigative journalism." Tong (2011:72-74) renovates and categorizes all this into eight types of topic: power abuse; wrongdoing of individuals and groups; resentment of individuals and groups towards powerful actors; hiding truths from the public; environmental issues; democratic events; historical topics; and foreign events. Later, Wang (2016:60-64) identified the three prominent topics in investigative journalism as political system issues, leadership issues and social stability issues.

My interviews confirmed what is suggested in the literature that public powers have been normally covered with negativity, but none of the participants in this study

offered me an explanation of what "public power" was, and no participants specifically referred to "public power" as "political power". Participant 3 said: "from my perspective, I would like to propose negative events to report. […] I hope to do something that can promote changes to the society, which relates to supervising public power." In terms of how to identify the relevance to public power of a news event, Participant 15 suggested that "good news is what realizes supervision of public power or promotes the national institutions [policy] involving public interest." Referring to my argument in chapter four, the function of scrutinizing the political elites is weakened for political reasons and the priority of investigation given to clarifying public doubts. Against this changing backdrop, only six participants proposed that "supervision of public power" was one of the criteria for them to search for valuable news (Participants 11, 12, 14, 22, 19, 21).

For instance, Participant 20 stated: "I think the media is over-portraying that [the abuse of public power] and it may widen the gap between the government and the masses. Well, it is necessary to question if public power is exercised properly, but it is not necessary to question everything, such as official documents, evidence, official seals and make an assumption that they [politicians] play tricks."

What he says contrasts with what we know from the current literature, that investigative journalists make critical inquiries into everything, especially anything relating to power. I suggest two reasons for him to have made such a comment. On the one hand, the media that he referred to as intensifying people–government conflict by "over-portraying" the abuses of power are predominantly commercial news

websites and news aggregators, according to our ensuing conversation. As mentioned earlier, it is a common strategy for such news media to apply sensational techniques to cater to their audience's tastes. On the other hand, he also implied that it is impossible for journalists to investigate every piece of evidence they obtain from different sources, because verification is a complicated process and it is subject to political, economic and social factors. This will be analyzed in the next chapter.

Once again, the disruption that digital media has brought to Chinese journalism is ubiquitous and also hard to capture. As previous studies have demonstrated, the media in China is an apparatus to disseminate the Party's ideology (Zhao, 1998); for the purposes of my research, it is comparable to frame digital media as a social apparatus to disseminate sensationalism and tabloidization as an "ideology". Such an "ideology" is not necessarily against the Party's (Herold, 2014; Meng, 2018), yet it does worsen the situation in which high-quality journalism struggles to survive.

6.3.3 Public interest and people

Relevance to the public is the most important yardstick for investigative journalists in selecting news items (Participant 14), even while there were variances in how to define "the public" among my research participants. By unpacking the meaning of what is commonly referred to as "the public" among journalists, I identify two interpretations in this study: the neglected public and the grassroots class. To a large degree, these two interpretations share the same meaning; both refer to people from rural, remote, underserved and impoverished areas (Wu, 2004). Journalists also noted

that intensive reporting on such groups of people caused a sense of fatigue among general audiences, while repeat reporting of events more familiar to audiences was perceived as welcome among audiences.

Firstly, the public refers to a community of people experiencing marginalization from what is the mainstream. Based on statements from my participants, this neglected group would seem to mean the ignored and marginalized people in a more general context. In addition, ongoing marginalization worsens their daily life and strengthens the tensions among themselves and also between them and the powerful. Such conflict may not necessarily appear as Tong (2011) suggested in a collective form, such as social protests. Instead, it could be identified in individual encounters, as suggested by multiple participants (21, 18, 20, 19, 6, 10), "seeing small from big (*yi xiao jian dan*)".

What journalists describe as "seeing small from big (*yi xiao jian dan*)" means "a straw shows which way the wind blows". Two of the participants (Participant 6 and 10) suggested that investigative reporting should not only reveal facts, but also propose solutions to the authorities. Speaking of the experience of investigating a rare disease among rural children in China, Participant 10 said that what drove her to carry out this reporting was a strong will to help those families with sick children; she was shocked that many families did not know what health insurance was. "Reporting should not stop at exposing facts and consuming others' miserable experience," she said. Although journalists are under more pressure today, they still try to preserve their aspiration to expose issues that are in the public's interest.

Participant 21 told me a story about a child of migrant workers who died after fighting with his peers in a rural village in Zhejiang province. He said:

> I noticed this on a regional official news website, which has newsworthiness, because what was suggested in this event is the living status of migrant workers' children. What is their mental status and what is their daily life like? […] Along with my investigation, I found that this event revealed the social ecology of this type of rural village. On the one hand, the economic index of this region increases every year, which demonstrates the prosperity of the economy. On the other hand, its social ecology is abnormal and unhealthy. Abundant students dropped out of school and no one cared about this. Also, for instance, in the claw (crane) machine there, what is inside is not toys. It is cigarettes. Moreover, I noticed that there were many similar cases in which children had fought with each other to death with iron batons and I was wondering where they got that from.

China is world-famous for its manufacturing, but the living status of immigrant workers' children is highly ignored, especially their education and mental health. He continued: "the real situation is hard to imagine". He told me that the economic transition of China requires a large amount of laborers immigrating to developed areas in China from these rural areas.

> From my interviews [with some workers with children], I learned to know that some factories did not allow workers to take their children to the factory (workshop). Since their major work was to stitch collars onto cardigans, these workers can work from home. Then they can rent a place and accommodate their children. Everyone considered that this might be the best solution, but it was rarely known that these children had become infected with bad habits. (Participant 21)

Participant 20 shared a similar view with this journalist that "*yi xiao jian da*" is a key strategy for them to construct the newsworthiness of events. Participant 21 treated such a news tip as "trivial material (*bian jiao liao*, leftover material)", but investigative journalists unfold the hidden implications of events. The marginalized public is the keyword for them to decide whether or not to follow-up on such news

tips. He remarked that although this piece of reporting did not obtain great attention from audiences, “I am more proud of this piece than the others of mine with 100,000+ [views].”

Only two of my participants (13 and 16) stated that stories about grassroots people were not necessarily bound to be negative. As suggested by Participant 13, a journalist from a leading commercial news website in China, “we [our news column] focus on the social impact on ordinary people, for instance, the grassroots and their destiny.” During my interviews, Participant 16 said that the polarization of social class is a hot-button issue on the Chinese media agenda, citing for instance the reporting on Fan Yusu and Yu Xiuhua, two female writers from a rural village.

Fan Yusu, working as a babysitter in Beijing, wrote an autobiography that gained a high degree of popularity online in 2017. Her autobiography was inspired by her working experiences over the years, covering many stories about how she struggled with her social identity and family background while living in the big city. Yu Xiuhua has suffered cerebral palsy since birth. After graduating from high school, she started writing poems. By 2015, she had published more than 2,000 poems. Participant 16 remarked that the reason both of these women received so much attention was because what they had achieved contrasted with their social identity. It is long-established that unexpectedness/surprise is a criterion for selecting the news (Harcup and O’Neill, 2001; 2017). When this “unexpectedness” is combined with certain publics, for instance, the grassroots class, such news articles will tend to be in

high demand because of such contrasting characteristics as those embodied in the aforementioned cases.

6.4 Recurrence in news agenda

"If the news agenda is occupied by stories about those people [grassroots and people living in the bottom of society] intensively, the audience is less likely to consider such news as newsworthy," Participant 18 stated. In order to overcome the "aesthetic fatigue of news audiences," multiple participants (18, 14, 20, 22, 16) told me that they would select news topics which had been absent from the current news agenda for some time, but which would not be too strange or novel for the audience. This is what I argue as "recurrence on the news agenda."

According to the experience of Participant 24, the motivation for her to cover the news about how bullying and abuse occurred in a school (Yuzhang School) for addiction treatment in Jiangxi was to free those students from abnormal treatments. She said this was not the only case in China and questioned why it was recurring, as the media had reported similar events before. In 2009, Yang Yongxin, a clinical psychiatrist, became famous for using electric shocks to treat internet addiction in teenagers; his name appeared in Chinese media intensively in the following year. Yang was also suspected of abusing teenagers sexually during the therapy. The reporting on Yang recurred on the news agenda in 2016, because he did not receive any judicial punishment. The reason for this was that the parents of the teenagers signed contracts before the treatment started. The similar, Jiangxi case, occurred in the summer of 2017. Participant 24 said:

> This [Yuzhang School] not only is a problem that concerns education and governmental regulations of running a school, but also shows a bigger picture of why those parents send their children to such a place, and what happened between parents and children indicates a more crucial problem.

Indeed, the unhealthy relationship between parents and offspring is an important issue on the news agenda. Especially in recent years, along with increasing sexual awareness and the popularity of the #metoo movement in China, the sexual and psychological issues concerning teenagers, family and society are never far from the spotlight. From a journalistic point of view, such news topics are not strange for news audiences, but it is important for journalists to remind audiences what is recurring and why. "The public could forget something, but journalists should not," Participant 9 said.

More recurrent events can be identified from the Chinese news agenda in recent years. Mentioned in Chapter Five, the death of Li Wenxing, an undergraduate who fell victim to a pyramid scheme in Tianjin, was a significant news story in China in 2017. Two thirds of participants shared a similar view that pyramid schemes, as a rampant form of illegal funding in China, were nothing new since the last century, and governments in local areas had made efforts to crack down on such companies over the years. One of the reasons that this event triggered the uproar of the public online was its recurrence and also relevance to the public (Participant 9). In 2016, a high school student, Xu Yuyu, died of cardiac arrest after becoming the victim of a telecommunications fraud. In 2017, "naked loans" became one of the keywords on the internet. Many female students in universities and colleges used their nude photos to apply for loans from loan sharks and some committed suicide when they were

incapable of repaying their debts. Stories about students keep recurring on the news agenda. Participant 20 told me that he had documented the trending topics online since he started his career, to keep himself aware of what has appeared on the news agenda and in what form.

In this section, I have explained that neglected groups and the grassroots class are the central focus of investigative reporting. People covered in these two groups are normally based in rural China. As numerous cases could be relevant to the interest of this part of the public, investigative journalists select what to cover according to the frequency of certain types of reporting. When news topics slip away from the media agenda for a short time, investigative journalists would assign themselves the task to draw the public's attention back to this "important news".

6.4 Conclusion

This chapter has discussed the economic and organizational pressures that Chinese investigative journalists in my study are faced with, how they identify public interest stories and what constrains them as they construct the values of news events. I argue that even though such economic pressures originate from organizational demands, evidence from the journalists I interviewed shows that the impacts of digital media also affects the immediacy, quantity and circulation of news.

Popular digital media in China has challenged perception of what counts as news, and since noteworthiness, always an important part of news production in China (Tong, 2011), is conditioned by the public's understanding of news, this scenario worsens the situation in which investigative journalists have found

themselves. Compared with the Party's widely acknowledged coercive controls on information flow, digital media has exerted influential power over serious media in a more fragmented and chronic manner. It has widened the discrepancies between journalists' and the public's attitudes towards the news. What these journalists need to "gatekeep" is more than the newsworthiness of information. More importantly, journalists should interpret such newsworthiness from the aspects of audience's consumption of the information prevailing on other social media platforms. Little research pays attention to this aspect of investigative journalism in China, while extensive scholarship has highlighted the digital change in other societies and other forms of journalism. In the *Digital News Report 2019* published by Reuters Institute (Newman et al., 2019:53), it is stated that in some Asian countries, such as Korea and Japan, only 21% and 17% of respondents considered that their news demands were reflected in watchdog news. The report suggests that this discrepancy is mainly identified by members of the public who want to see more coverage scrutinizing political officials, which watchdog journalism fails to do.

As journalism worldwide experiences a crisis of sourcing quality and credible information online (Newman et al., 2019; McNair, 2018), there is no exception in China. Many studies show that the online public is easily misled and swayed by "harmful information" and this situation legitimates the online governance of the Party with both hard and soft methods (Jia, 2019; Stockmann and Luo, 2017). Undeniably, the introduction of digital media has complicated the relationship between journalists, the Party-state and the public. Whilst the level of development of

political-economy in China constrains the activities of journalists, the digital media, like a soft power, has led both the public and journalism into another predicament. The political-economy of the Party-state and the online public practices empowered by digital media have both unprecedentedly shaped the landscape of investigative journalism in China.

Chapter Seven: Verifying Sources and Approaching to the "Truth"

7.1 Introduction

This chapter analyses how Chinese investigative journalists verify sources and sources-provided information in the digital age. I argue that as sourcing news from digital media has become a popular trend among Chinese journalists (Jian and Liu 2018), investigative journalists in this research do not positively think about this trend, because they are increasingly challenged by the overload of information online, including misinformation, disinformation, opinions, fake profiles and sources. Such perception has led to these journalists interrogating digital media users in offline environments to verify the credibility of information for their reporting, because as introduced in Chapter Five, there is a significant change in journalistic perception of their role as disseminating accurate and facts-based information. Digital media only provides early indications of news, but journalists still have to turn into traditional footwork to "gatekeep" the credibility, as well as the quality of sources-provided information. In the model of hierarchical influence, journalistic verification is studied within the levels of routine and individual analysis (Shoemaker and Reese, 2014). The degree of journalistic autonomy at the individual level could influence how journalists report the facts they obtained from sources and the analysis of newsroom routine concerns about what kinds of sources that journalists would like to use and approach. Argued in the last chapter, reporting the news could arouse the interest of the public cannot guarantee the quality of a piece of investigative reporting. More importantly,

journalists are also the gatekeepers of what are the verifiable “facts”. Namely, investigative journalists I interviewed in Beijing highlighting their role of being the gatekeeper of factual information. What is kept outside the gate is not only the sensitive information for political elites and worthless information for news organization, but also the information lacks of credibility or unverified evidence.

Even though extensive literature has explored journalists-sources relationship in China (Bei, 2013; Hassid, 2016; Zeng, Burgess and Bruns, 2019; Jian and Liu, 2018) limited studies discuss how the sourcing practices among investigative journalists is shaped by digital media and how these journalists react to such an information overloaded environment. Less research incorporates verification as a key strategy to gatekeep the accuracy and truthfulness of information, because increasing scholarly attentions were given to discuss what can be reported after verification and what cannot in the context of China. As Chapter Six looks at economic and organizational constraints on news selection, this chapter examines the constraints on news verification. For the information to pass the “gate”, investigative journalists rely on traditional methods, including face-to-face communication with sources and on-the-ground investigation to guarantee the credibility of news.

This chapter is structured as follows. First, I will briefly outline the key debates about the relationship among journalists, sources and verification in the digital context. Second, I will introduce three types of information that indicate the challenges journalists experience with sorting swaths of information on digital media

to find news. Third, I will examine the offline strategies that these journalists applied to verify information.

7.2 Journalists, sources and verification in Chinese context

The boom in scholarship on journalistic practices of source-verification benefits from the prevalence of digital media in China (see Chapter Two). Newsgathering, as one of the most important reasons for journalists to use digital media, is explored in different levels of analysis. The major findings of this stream of studies demonstrate that a growing number of journalists confirm that browsing digital media helps them to find news tips (Jian and Liu, 2018; Cui and Lin, 2015). First, Chinese journalists suggest that they can source news tips with high sensitivity on digital media such as Weibo and *Tianya* forum (Hassid and Repnikova, 2016; Hassid, 2016; Sullivan, 2014). Second, research notes that journalists are more likely to source from digital media as breaking news occurs (Tong, 2017a). Citizen journalism, participatory journalism and the grassroots in China contribute to publishing and sharing information timely on the condition that journalists are not able to arrive at the scene (Xin, 2010).

However, such advantages of using social media did not last for a long while. Politically, along with the establishment of the CAC in 2014, the Party's controls over internet-based media and online contents worsened the flow of information (see Chapter Two). The Great Fire Wall realizes the Party's omnipresent internet control through a set of strategies including: website blocking, content filtering, sensitive words filtering and instant message interception (Xu, 2015). Moreover, major digital media platforms in China are considered as a harbour incubating the information

lacking credibility (Zhang and Guo, 2019; Guo, 2019, Fu and Lee, 2016). In this scenario, many journalists choose to distance digital media, especially for quality journalism (Li and Sparks, 2016). Although journalists do apply the contents sourced from digital media into their reporting (Tong, 2017a; Wang, Sparks and Yu, 2018), journalists do not use what is provided by digital media users uncritically and they are prone to treat citizen journalism (user generated contents) as a hint-provider of news (Tong, 2015b).

Whilst the role of social media, regarding the practices of journalistic sourcing, is declining according to the literature, less research points out that social media is conducive to journalistic verification. Whereas Western journalists tend to have ready access to governmental and taboo information to verify once all is gathered, Chinese journalism researchers suggest that among journalists there, the idea of verification is often used synonymously with the idea of fact-checking (Polumbaum and Xiong, 2008; Tong, 2017b; 2015b). In the Chinese context, this fact-checking focuses on details of information collected by journalists themselves – and sometimes by netizens, as the information may be harder to come by due to governmental restraints. And while this fact-checking process occurs over the course of the reporting to compare one item of information with another item, as the information is available and as it emerges online or from sources, verification, on the other hand, is a more complex practice that begins with checking facts and questioning the credibility of the information provider (Zeng, Burgess and Bruns, 2019).

Compared with knowing how to verify sources and sources-provided information, it is more important for Chinese investigative journalists to know what information is the taboo of the Party (see Chapter Six). Even though journalists are able to verify such tabooed information, they still cannot present that as facts in their reporting (Wang, 2016). In most cases, journalists would not spend effort in vain to verify the unpublishable information. In this scenario, through verification, journalists confirm that sources being used are not overtly aligned with a single ideological position and that the reporting processes of source information comport with journalistic standards of source-verification established by leading journalists to ensure a consistent means of information-gathering and delivery (Tong, 2017b). As this chapter suggests, verification in a digital age in China, one influenced heavily by information via social media, is extremely challenging for investigative journalists who are finding they must move beyond online tools to confirm and challenge information – and sources.

7.3 Information overload on digital media

In this section, I discuss the journalists' perception of digital media as a site for newsgathering. Investigative journalists in Beijing suggest that this site is characterized by overloaded information and they question the legitimacy and authority of the information causing the overload.

Interdisciplinary scholarship across the fields of Communication, Psychology, and Sociology has identified trends of "information overload," a notion that describes the experience and behaviours of media users (and producers) when they are

immersed in a vast pool of information (Savolainen, 2007). Information overload, as a subjective perception among information consumers, describes a situation that media users considered themselves are overwhelmed by a large amount of information (Lee, Lindsey and Kim, 2017; Holton and Chyi, 2012). When users (or makers, such as journalists) are faced with what they may consider to be "too much information," such as in the case of social media posts, blogs, search results, and sources, these individuals tend to distance themselves from the content to seek respite (Brennen, 2019; Holton and Chyi, 2012; Liang and Fu, 2016). Information overload also contributes to media users seeking alternative venues for their information, deeper analysis of issues they are trying to understand, and verification of the information that has overloaded them (Lee, Lindsey and Kim, 2017).

Research into "information overload" suggests that online users may not suffer from the deluge of information in the same ways as the news producer (Liang and Fu, 2016). Audiences, always wanting more information and desiring to shape public-press discourse through online interactions with journalists, apply pressure to news workers by pushing to them user-made content and demanding journalistic content in response (Bossio and Holton, 2019). And while news users tend to find that having greater trust in a news source reduces the likelihood of encountering "information overload" (Lee, Lindsey and Kim, 2017), journalists – including in China (Li, 2019; Su, 2019) – have expressed that the online environment, workplace demands, and other social and cultural pressures on their work has complicated their experiences in determining newsworthiness, authenticity of sources, and audience desires and

interests in news products (Kormelink and Meijer, 2018; Larsen, 2017). Participants (2, 11, 16, 17, 18, 21, 25) working across a variety of journalism outlets said that they are increasingly inundated with information on social media that they must explore and trudge through to find news. They said that they struggle with the mass publishing of users' opinions, disinformation, and misinformation that appears as news and that warrant additional reporting to verify what is valid for daily and investigative work, creating a sense of overwhelming interactions with information. The following part will specify how information is circulated in this overloaded environment.

7.3.1 Experiencing more (and more) information

Journalists were clear that the changing nature of digital journalism – including investigative journalism – includes an influence of time compression, where audiences demand an immediacy of news that pressures journalists into speeding-up the reporting and verification processes in their reporting (Lee, Lindsey and Kim, 2017). This pressure, combined with the multiple choices and channels of information online, has made some journalists feel as though they are being asked to produce more news despite a lack of valid (or verifiable) information. Participant 16, for example, said that as audiences demanded more information rather than an in-depth analysis of information, investigative journalists were forced to balance the short-term and long-term reporting projects. Users on digital media provide insights based on "hot-button issues formed by public opinion," Participant 16 said, but that even with all of the potential news stories that appear online, it becomes difficult "to balance"

reporting on trending stories and doing investigations because of the pressures of time and audience interests. Despite these audience demands, journalists say they must first and foremost produce in-depth, original, and quality journalism – even when feeling overloaded – to meet professional norms and expectations (Le Masurier, 2015; Participant 19).

Even sifting through social media to find stories that could be covered is mired in platforms that are becoming home to "fake" pieces of information, the journalists said. Participants (16, 18, 11 and 19) reported that journalists are becoming slower at producing news, especially investigative journalism, because they need to spend so much time investigating what is fake or not, and that they often find themselves pursuing information that they later find out to be false. Participant 16 commented:

> (In this scenario,) I publish what I got from interviews. For the part that I have not interviewed yet, I would publish tomorrow. And it is very possible that what would be found out tomorrow can subvert/be opposite to what I published today. […] Faced with pressure from 24/7 news cycle, (more and more cases that) the journalists failed to balance the both sides.

In terms of how such situation becomes disruptive, Participant 18 remarked that "as the core facts of news event are proved to be fake, it is meaningless to investigate further," and it is within the learning of information as being false or misleading after time spent online with a source or a piece of information that adds to a frustration, burnout, and feelings of distrust in online channels, participants said. Participant 5, said that journalists must make decisions on information credibility at the same time they conduct deeper interrogations of source credibility, a time-rich and sometimes

draining experience. “So much information online, especially on some public accounts on Weibo, is not reliable,” Participant 5 said, continuing:

> For me myself, I read something online, and I tell the editor. If the editor says the story is fine, then, I go to verify starting with contacting the person who posted the information online. If that person is one of the people involved in the event, I will ask him/her about what he/she said. If the person is not involved in the event … I will contact the person who put this source online originally.

Social and geographic distance between journalists and sources is an emerging area of study, particularly in terms of doing journalism online (Wintterlin, 2020). While distance may be unavoidable – even on the internet, which is said to bring people closer together, these investigative journalists said that not being able to see or meet with an online source negatively influences their trust in the source’s information. Participant 9, said that the process of verification via social media is sometimes futile. In one case, the journalist explained, an editor found what appeared to be an official document online that disciplined a local government official. The editor believed that the document was real because of its official seal, but after the article was published, the journalists said:

> The local propaganda department said that this is fake news – no such person and no such document. What results the fake news, in fact, is the incongruity between journalist and editor.

Participant 9 believed this instance of publishing a version of “fake news” was due to an editor simply believing online information because it looked real, not because of governmental influence. As suggested by Egelhofer et al. (2020), “fake news” has become a buzzword since 2016 and used arbitrarily among journalists. One of the commonest implications of “fake news” refers to the information with low credibility

or disinformation, based on the experience from western scholars, which is possibly used by political elites to turn against what is exposed by media (ibid). In my study, I did not observe that investigative journalists strongly considered that "fake news" is a new political or ideological instrument to strengthen the Party's rule of media and eradicate dissent voices in China. More importantly, balancing between determinations of "truth" and whether a news item and "fact" would pass government criticism is a constant struggle, made more complicated by massive amounts of information, disinformation, and misinformation online (Participant 12).

Indeed, participants indicated that it is the "raw" nature of information that appears on social media (Shapiro, Brin, Bédard-Brûlé and Mychajlowycz, 2013) which often appears sometimes out of context and sometimes absent of appropriate sourcing that challenges them to question and verify facts in more ways than ever before. This added level of critical thinking and navigation of social media is an added toolset needed by journalists, an adopted skill that expands their environment of information overload.

That said, investigative journalists in this study report that the promise of social media to provide access to stories and sources has become second nature, adopted as a journalistic norm and that only in the past few years have they become better at critically analysing what appears online (Participant 7). "The internet breaks traditional media's monopoly on information-providing," said Participant 11. "Everyone has a say, and it is common that fake news appears." Yet, while online

information channels have become important for the public to be more critical of what is and isn't professional journalism, she said:

> Traditional media has to calm down to do verification and interview in-person. News reporting cannot be made in a short time. Traditional media need to provide credible and evidence-based information, which can withstand the test of time, audience, and history.

Participants said that while they cannot prevent the dissemination of misinformation and disinformation online, they can attempt to provide an accurate interpretation with new and reliable evidence for the public to make judgements, though that requires distancing themselves from some online information sources and going offline to meet and verify information. Conducting investigative journalism solely with online information and attempts at verification, journalists said, would lead to poor reporting that undermines their news outlet's brand and reputation (Bossio and Holton, 2019). In this case, then, maintaining the professional identity of journalism, a brand's reputation, and the professional's identity as a solid journalist in an age of information overload adds to a desire to create closer social and geographic connections with sources. But, participants said, they struggle sometimes to identify what sources are even legitimate enough to meet as they wade through all that is out there to find what may be true. This is especially challenging, they said, because of the inundation of opinion posts that are masked as "objective information" or even journalism.

7.3.2 An inundation of online public opinion

Participants said that while they still use social media to find sources and stories (Participant 18 and 20), what is appearing online is not only in greater quantities but also rooted in diverse opinions. As demonstrated in Chapter Two, the internet in China

is a terrain full of different voices with the rapid growth of netizens. Scholarship on internet studies treats this as a positive trend that the public's demands can be addressed and aggregated as an effective force to compete with the authorities (Yang, 2009; Lagerkvist, 2005; Zhang and Guo, 2019). Meanwhile, some researchers also argue that internet public opinion significantly impacts the decision-making of government at different levels (Tang, Chen and Wu, 2018; Jia, 2019). Through analyzing the online practices of the public, Tang, Chen and Wu (2018) conclude that provincial governments do take public opinion seriously and adopt measures to react, although only in selected cases. Moreover, as breaking news events and disasters across China occur, the internet-based media is increasingly favoured among online users, where they post seemingly "depoliticized" comments and discussions (Zeng, Burgess and Bruns, 2019).

However, the journalists I interviewed shared different views towards this landscape. As noted by Su (2019), the posts from users are often ripe with subtle political and opinion messages designed to influence others' opinions on the event, the government's handling of it, and any related social issues. The opinions widely circulated on digital media not only are bound with different economic, individual and political interests, but also sometimes expressed in an emotional manner (Tong, 2014). These interest-supported opinions have been increasingly sprawling on the internet in recent years and formed into groups. For instance, "the internet water army (*shui jun*)", also termed as "paid posters", refers to individuals or a group of people who are paid/hired by PRs or organizations to express tendentious opinions on social

networking platforms intensively (CNCTST, 2018:175). Such opinions can be either positive or negative towards a phenomenon or individual and have proved highly influential on online public opinion. Similar expressions like internet/web hyper and spin doctors also indicates these interest-supported groups. Moreover, some opinion groups focus on expressing political views, like "Little Pinks (*xiao fen hong*)" a naming from Chinese internet literature in 2008, referring to an online group advocating Chinese nationalism and populism which normally consists of females. Participants said that they are frequently led to report certain stories based upon the amount of opinion in online media mentioned above that represents a sense of what they referred to as "public opinion" on issues and events in the news, especially in the case of breaking news.

For instance, during the investigation of an event that a pregnant woman committed suicide several hours before her labour in Yulin hospital due to being in agony, more than one participant (15, 17, 18 and 19) told me that what was circulated on Weibo at the beginning of this event disrupted their investigation. As suggested by Participant 17, the hospital found spin doctors and wanted to avoid shouldering responsibility for her death. After the hospital released a silent video in which the pregnant female "kneeled down" three times to her husband, online public opinion was soon dispersed to favour the hospital side and turned against the victim's family. "This video gave the public an impression that the female begged her husband to have a C-section. However, the video had no sound and you could not know why the female knelt down, because of the pain, or begging. As a matter of fact, it is just a

motion that the female's knee bent downwards and no sufficient evidence to say that she was kneeling down." Participant 14 told me that this video misled many people, even journalists. However, what made this situation more complicated was that the female's family found a spin doctor, too. He said:

> I noticed that the victim's family was very smart as well and they knew the power of online public opinion. The family wrote an announcement about what they said and what the hospital said, and contacted a 'Big Vs' (verified Weibo account as opinion leader) to post that online.

Participant 17 remarked that today both individuals and organizations have learned to use different digital media to reach their goals and weaken the disadvantages to them. As I discussed in Chapter Five, this scenario strengthens the journalistic role of being credible-information disseminators, which characterize their gatekeeper role most. In order to fulfil this role, it also strengthens the necessity for journalists to carry out offline verification in person. Participant 9 said:

> In April this year, we got a source about a soakaway (polluted water pit) in Langfang, Hebei province. What we got to know in the beginning is that some villagers from a local chemical factory poured industrial waste acid to the soakaway from time to time. Then this area was polluted. Many people in the village got cancer and the number of deaths kept increasing. We were told (by sources) that their tap water was polluted as well. What's more, some villagers said the head of the village had colluded with the chemistry factory which caused the pollution. However, I cannot verify that, because it lacks direct (core) evidence.

Two-thirds of the participants said they had come across cases in which important information could not be verified with evidence for other than political reasons. For instance, individuals have been known to distort the facts to minimize the negative impact upon themselves (Participant 14 and 19). Against this background, prominent

newsworthiness such as negative, high relevance to public interest and officials cannot warrant a piece of investigative reporting (see Chapter Six). I discussed in Chapter Five that nowadays investigative journalists consider obtaining solid evidence from different sources is also important to decide whether a piece of information can pass the gate. Even though their judgment on what facts could be included in reporting is subjected to the orders given by regional propaganda departments and editors' evaluation, what they reported must be factual (Participants 12, 14, 18 and 23). Journalists have to discern facts from opinions and speculations and personal verification is the foremost. For speculations that journalists cannot be proved with evidence, such as accusations against one of the parties in events, journalists (Participant 9, 14, 15, 22) said they would avoid including that in their reporting.

In addition, while there may be nuggets of news within these posts, journalists seeking deeper meanings and explanations in news events struggle with how easily a news event can slip into a debate that slows the reporting process. "It is common nowadays that breaking news appears online and it may be just a tip of the iceberg," said Participant 23. An investigation may begin to lead to new ideas and leads, but easily leads journalists with information that is an interpretation of events, not facts. Participant 23 explained:

> The public starts to choose a side to support and address opinion which forms a trending topic. Then, the mainstream media engages in and investigates. Through the media's investigation, it is found out that the truth of an event is totally different from what it was like in the beginning.

While the process of deciphering opinion from fact is a common challenge for daily journalists as audiences have learned how to use professional services and methods to present fake, biased, and customized information as professional journalism (Jackson and Moloney, 2016; Stockmann and Luo, 2017), participants said social media posts – and reposts – that carry these characteristics are increasingly interfering with their investigative work. Such symptoms of information overload also influence personal use of social media (Bossio and Holton, 2019), as journalists facing overload distance themselves from the platforms that spread massive amounts of information that they may not trust. Reporters world-wide find that the stories they work on change and develop as the investigation progresses. They find sources to be inaccurate or untruthful and run across new information that alters their reporting.

However, these investigative journalists in Beijing also said that they believe they must even apply greater critical lenses over the course of their investigations to question the credibility of their online sources in addition to all of the other "natural" progressions and challenges of journalistic work. Some of this heightened attention to source credibility, Participant 5 and 23 said, is learned from working on asking skeptical questions about governmental information and propaganda. As Participant 25 said, "aside from the well-known reason – the political control – I think the truth is hard to be known because people's minds are complicated," adding that the crowded social media field makes it hard to determine what news sources and topics found on social media are true, opinion-based, emotional, or intentionally misleading or wrong.

To be clear, journalists said social media was once a viable option for finding clues to trace more sources, but perhaps not for verification. Participant 17 a newspaper journalist said:

> Journalists can track the tip provided by social media users to find more informants. In terms of what is true or not, it is the journalists' job to cross-check with different informants, to get close to those people involved in the event. That's the journalists' responsibility.

Social media is still a place for news tips, Participant 17 said, but the monitoring of social media platforms in terms of how they release information and what information they release (Larsen, 2017) is double-the-effort in keeping track of what sources are fake, misleading, or valuable to the reporting.

As commented by Participant 20, "it is interesting to see that when every stakeholder in a news event is willing to say something to contribute to truth, facts still cannot be revealed." In contrast to what was discussed many years ago that freedom of speech in China was worried by media scholar (Xiao, 2011), empirical evidence from my research suggests that the boom in online expression among media users leads to the development of journalism into another predicament. Participant 19 said, "nowadays, the power (*quan li*) of people is enlarged a lot. They know how to use the media and that is what novice journalists need to learn to defend [to avoid being cheated]." In short, journalists said in a digital world, the people at the centre of information posted online are still just as important to journalists as the information itself. This perspective is discussed next.

7.3.3 Questionable sources

Generally, investigative journalists involved in this study identified challenges not only with verifying information online in an age of information overload but with evaluating the legitimacy or truthfulness of the people posting the information. Participant 9, said that through social media individuals can provide credible information with images or videos of protests and other news events. Yet, he said, because of the degree that users are using social media to misrepresent information – and themselves – it has become important for journalists to validate the identity of the person who posts information. "The credibility [of a source who posts video or images] is high," due to the governmental access afforded one who records mass events, the journalist said, "but we still have to verify in person." In reporting stories associated with an image posted online, Participant 9 said, "We would find the person who posted the original information and then find other different sources."

However, even though sources provided visual and audio evidence, journalists suggest they still need to evaluate the credibility of such evidence critically. For example, as the founder of an online phone app, WePhone, Su Xiangmao, was found dead of suspected suicide in September 2017, an abundance of information relating to the death – including details about the ex-wife's demands for money – overwhelmed Chinese social media in the following days, which became a breaking news. Watching how social media spread accusations against both the wife and the husband that could give clues to the man's suicide, Participant 13 was drawn to the information, including several screenshots of chat history on WeChat, posted by one user on Weibo in particular. "I contacted this person to verify the details he mentioned about

Su's ex-wife," the journalist said, "however, he said he didn't know, and that he is a *duan zi shou*," a person who operates as an online satirist or "joke player." While the journalist initially suspected the user's details might have been true, it was only through verification of social media that the journalist was able to debunk it. Such scenario is the case that journalists were puzzled by the fake sources, which provided seemingly "credible" information with visual materials.

Here, again, journalists likened the difficulties of using social media to verify users to the challenges of fact-checking government propaganda (Participant 24). Much of the verification process is based on what sources (and what types of sources) journalists trust and can easily lead to the rushing of an investigation due to unreliable source information captured online (Participant 20), which forces the journalists to search again amid the overloaded social media channels in China. Participant 21 explained that while much coverage at their news organization is obtained from Weibo, "I don't like sourcing from public accounts on social media, because I think they are not reliable and (the content on public accounts) are subjective."

Participant 7 said wrong and misleading information appeared on social media about a tiger attack at a local zoo. The posted information was plagued with opinion, wrong information, and by sources who had no independent or verifiable information about the case. For this journalist, this scenario highlights the challenges of social media as space overloaded with opinions, problematic information, unverified facts, and even conspiracy that journalists are less likely to uncover if they cannot also verify and possibly meet the source herself. Furthermore, Participant 16, an online

journalist with 10 years of experience, said that mainstream news workers must do this added work to verify information in ways that distance themselves from fake journalists, sources of dis-/mis-information, and overt opinion. As social media, with its inundation of information and other challenges, Participant 16 said that social media "can be a good tool providing good news tips; however, it cannot shoulder the role of serious/mainstream media." Journalists clarified that social media, best represented in the words of Participant 16, "is bound with different kinds of interest" and that "it does not need to carry out the social responsibility as we (journalists) do."

Below, I will discuss what strategies that these journalists adopt to overcome the constraints brought by digital media. For these investigative journalists, the nature of social media as a tool for reporting is leading them to increase offline verification, returning to traditional forms of journalism designed to meet and critique the source of information rather than examine their validity online.

7.4 Offline verification as journalistic process

Offline verification, participants said, also provides a means by which to cope with feeling "overloaded" by social media channels, fake information, opinions, the vast amount of information online, the proliferation of fake profiles, and a general distrust in what they read on social media. This overload has reinforced Chinese investigative journalists' dedication to a conventional form of verification: meeting face-to-face with sources. More importantly, their offline verification practice allows journalists to observe facts and sources, assisting them in determining the truthfulness of the source and the information. Indeed, while investigative journalists may be less likely to

embrace the internet due to the homogenization of content and the emotional expression of public opinion, according to this group of investigative journalists in Beijing, journalists are continuing to use online networks to find stories and sources—even if they consider social media content less-credible—and are increasing offline activities to verify information captured online. This practice can be seen as a later stage for journalistic gatekeeping after journalists have discussed with editors about the newsworthiness of news topics. As journalists, especially novice journalists, have confirmed with editors that the news tips he/she wished to trace as "doable" topics, like what was called by Ettema and Glasser (1987), they can start their investigations.

Participant 20, for example, said that trending topics online are worthy of being investigated if the journalist suspects rumours around the topic will spread and in-depth investigation will result in a sense of truth and public calm. To do this, journalists said the "only" approach is to find a person – not an online profile – to verify the information (Participant 9 and 16). Even though the sources can provide image materials to prove the occurrence, journalists still insisted on going to the scene. In this scenario, what is highlighted is the cooperation among peers. It takes time for journalists to "make progress" (Participant 24) because not all sources, such as officials, are easy to access. This stresses the importance of collaboration among journalists when many stakeholders are involved in a news event. On the other hand, it implied that credible information is normally obtained in the offline environment, especially more sources are required.

Similarly, Participant 9, who told me the case about the water pollution sourced from a social media account of an environmental organization in China, which he considered as trustworthy. This did not save him from the need for offline verification. He said:

> We were told [by the source] that many people got cancer in this area due to water pollution, but we could not prove that. So, this (reason) did not appear in the reporting. We could see that villagers washed clothes with underground water. When they boiled porridge with the water from the well, we could see a layer of white foam on the surface. […] And that was what was written in the reporting.

What's more, Participant 12, said that information needs to be critiqued by investigative journalists in-person and that journalists' "old networks" of sources work best to do so. Participant 16, a journalist for 10 years who is working in an online news outlet, seemed to agree, saying:

> The internet and Weibo are just tools for retrieving/obtaining information. It can provide us ways to find some hot topics, but what really matters is my friends, informants, deep throats, and also lawyers. Especially for scoop news, for instance, the downfall of a provincial official which is usually secretly announced, you cannot know that from Weibo, but friends can tell you.

Besides the inundation of information that journalists wade through online – and beyond the online means of information-sharing and gathering – journalists in this study said that they simply do not trust many of the sources posting information without seeing or meeting them. "I think that half of sources from social media are different from what the person said originally when we go to verify," said Participant 14, who has four years of experience in the field at a newspaper. The journalist continued, "Because when a person wants to report something to the media, he will

hide the disadvantages for himself, so you have to evaluate if the fact is possible to be checked."

Referring to the principle of "seeking truth from facts" (Latham, 2000), which I discussed above (see 7.2), journalists insisted that facts mean that "something happened" and that these things, or the effects, are "observable." Participant 13 explained that part of her verification process includes observing a source's behaviour and body language to help make a judgment about what is "true." The journalist said, "It is impossible to fact-check every critical moment of an event or in a person's life, but what I observed regarding how the interviewee communicated and got along with others, was close to the real thing." What Participant 13 elsewhere in her interview calls *pang zheng*, or "circumstantial evidence," such as observed behaviour of a source, is crucial to offline verification practices as online content—fake and otherwise—is "overloading" many journalists.

While mis-representation, inaccuracies, and even dis-information are a common trial for journalists globally, particularly in an age of competition with alternative forms of media (Deng, 2018), journalists said that they felt these issues were increasing, evidenced by the amount of times that offline verification had proven online information wrong. Such was the case for Participant 2 who has worked for two years at a newspaper and who said an investigation was led astray by an online source who said a local forest was surrounded by garbage. "As I went to verify," the journalist said, "it was just one of the gates of this park that was blocked by trash." In cases like this one, great intensity of public discussion of a particular topic on a media

platform drives journalists determined to verify information on their own to find that their stories have either become less interesting, important, or "true." So, while offline verification may assist in a story's accuracy, it might also lead to its demise in terms of newsworthiness (see 6.3).

Face-to-face verification has benefitted journalists with about more troubling stories. Again, when speaking of the death of Li Wenxing (see 5.2.1), Participant 12 highlighted the importance of going offline for information. "In our organization, two photojournalists and two journalists were sent out to investigate," the journalist said:

> They found out about the main facts very soon, and although what was found cannot contribute to knowing all of the truth of the event, we can make sure that what is published in the news are the facts we know.

Journalists said that an overloading of online information makes it impossible to verify every detail surrounding a news event or topic, but as Participant 12 explained, journalists must make decisions about which facts need confirming the most.

Related to the case of the suicide of Su Xiangmao (see 7.3.3), Participant 13 stressed the importance of investigating details of his suicide note offline, as online efforts only complicated the investigation. "After Su's death, his family only published a part of his suicide note online," the journalist said. "However, during my investigation, his family showed me the whole piece." Not only was the journalist able to gain more information for the case by meeting sources offline but was able to verify that the information in the note – and debated online – was credible.

These offline interviews do not come with their own emerging challenges. Journalists said that because so many of their colleagues have come to use social

media to verify information and sources as a new norm, they find themselves relying on veteran journalists to learn or to remember how to verify source credibility offline (Participants 12, 16 and 19). “There is a kind of performance by the interviewee to alter their behaviour and utterances to put themselves in the best light when interviewed,” said Participant 13. “It is not easy for journalists to know what is performance if they do not spend enough time with the interviewees.” In fact, participants said balancing information-gathering on social media with verification on the ground and by knowing the credibility of a source as much as the actual “truth” of the “facts” posted online is paramount for continued legitimacy of investigative journalists in Beijing in seeking “truth.” By verifying the source offline, Participant 13 said, “I cannot say what I saw is ‘truth,’ but at least I know the real status of the interviewee.”

7.5 Conclusion

This chapter has argued that investigative journalists in Beijing are increasingly challenged by the amount of information – fake and real – on growing social media platforms that is making their jobs as journalists harder as they spend more and more time deciphering what information is real. This chapter not only echoes what I discussed in Chapter Five that the role of investigative journalists is shifting from “critical watchdog” to “information disseminator”, but also offers an in-depth analysis of how such transition takes place in altering the gatekeeping practices of these journalists. Their comments suggested that because of the difficulties of finding the “truth” information online and among sources, many who are either incorrect,

misleading, or fake, these journalists are returning to offline environments to verify sources and their information.

Extensive studies on Chinese journalism argue that social media has been conducive to improving the autonomy of journalists in China and powerfully changing the workflow of journalists (Yu, 2011; Fu and Lee, 2016; Jian and Liu, 2018; Bei, 2013; Cui and Lin, 2015). Also, some researchers (Yu, 2011; Tang and Sampson, 2012) celebrated the rising of Weibo, which created a space for journalists and the public sharing information where journalists could source from. Yu's (2011) research elaborated functions that social media plays in the journalistic process of gatekeeping, which implied journalists were benefited from the online agenda that the discussions of online public can legitimate journalistic engagement in reporting sensitive topics. Several years ago, Chinese journalists were benefited from the emergence of internet-based media (Hassid and Repnikova, 2016) regarding sourcing and enlarging the impact of their reporting, but the journalists I interviewed made no mention of this. Journalists' use of online media is paradoxically constructed today. They did not deny that their dominant sources were still from the internet-based media, mainly referring to Weibo, WeChat and forum, whereas what is highlighted in this chapter is that it is harder for journalists to receive credible news tips from these media platforms, and even that they need to spend more time and apply judgement to "gatekeep" the truthfulness of information.

The information, which lacks credibility, can lead the efforts of verification among journalists into vain. While more sources and news tips are available to

journalists online, misinformation and disinformation also comes along. As facts are wrapped with opinions, misinformation and disinformation from different online sources, the journalists spend much more time to verify the evidence provided by the "so-called" informants. Although Participants (11 and 17) argued that journalists could not expect their interviewees are "pure", which implies that interviewees have no demands to address, in an age that everyone can post information online, the journalists are indeed confused about what sources are credible and worthy of tracing in further. Even though the "gut feeling" of journalists might help, the face-to-face communication with sources can never be absent for investigative reporting.

Participant 25 remarked that the reputation of investigative journalism (or a news organization) is strongly associated with the accuracy of information. To make sure of the accuracy of information, nothing is better than seeing, interviewing and observing in person from multiple approaches. Although the journalists said they could not guarantee what they saw was "true" (Participant 13 and 23), by searching for different sources, the journalists considered cross-checking offline is the best option. Here, as discussed above, the journalists' interpretation of "truth" is largely based upon what they can witness. They do not deny that such truth may be "literal, partial or superficial", but at least it can be evidenced by testimony from different sources. So what they did is to compare and evaluate the accuracy of information they obtained from different approaches. As said by Participant 25, "news is made [by journalists], but not sat (*xin wen shi zuo chu lai de, bu shi zuo chu lai de*)". In Chinese, "make" and "sit" are homophones. Therefore, these journalists are

increasingly spending time dissecting increasing amount of online information and doing even more legwork. While I do not suggest these findings are generalizable beyond these investigative journalists in Beijing, I highlight that their experience with digital media has bolstered their commitment to offline verification, an outcome which could be explored in other journalistic contexts and cultures.

To sum up, I demonstrated another important aspect regarding how investigative journalists practice gatekeeping in verification and how they perform at the gate to guarantee the truthfulness of information. Similar to Chapter Five and Six, I started by introducing the constraints and problems that digital media brings to journalistic investigation, which significantly complicates the difficulties of accessing accurate information. More importantly, this chapter provides new evidence to argue that to understand the complexity of news production in China we should combine the perspective from micro-level with macro-levels. As current studies contribute to figuring out how powerful elites reigns on the way how truth should be told, the evidence in this chapter suggests in further that it is insufficient to say that certain factors always dominate how journalists construct news, such as administrative orders and bans from the propaganda department. News production is much more complicated than we have been informed how the factors beyond the political constraints impact gatekeeping. In the concluding chapter, I will return to the arguments I made in this thesis and the current trends in journalism studies globally. In doing so, I will clearly elaborate to what degree our understanding on this

particular group of journalists in China can be illuminating to the journalism in the globe, conceptually and empirically.

Chapter Eight: Conclusion

8.1 Introduction

This chapter begins with a summary of the main findings in this research into the way that Chinese investigative journalism is experiencing an unprecedented impact from digital media. According to the findings, I suggest that studying investigative journalism in the non-western context, specifically in China, needs to critically engage with the concepts developed from western experience. It may be a challenging work for researchers to look at aspects which were thinly represented in previous studies, but what is significant in this discipline—Chinese journalism studies—is making sense of the "taken-for-granted" nature of practices, and avoiding setting out from an academic stereotype established during the course of research history. Although I have no intention of generalizing the findings of this research into other types of Chinese journalism and journalism in other cultures, I suggest that the results are available to be tested in other social and cultural contexts.

8.2 Summary of findings

This thesis explores the key practices of Chinese investigative journalists, the constraints they are faced with, and also the strategies they use to respond to such constraints. After I engaged with media professionals and 25 investigative journalists in Beijing, I found that the digital media are a critical challenge these journalists are undergoing in news production. Compared with political coercion, this digital media based challenge complicates the production of investigative reporting in a way that 1) it is shaping the news-related activities of the public, such as consuming and sharing

the news; 2) it is pushing the news organizations to pursue market gains in a more intensive manner, which means certain quality reporting from investigative journalists being sacrificed; 3) taken together, journalists' perceptions of their job, role and practices are in transition, and this transition is evident in investigative journalism in China today is not a journalism that emphasizes on reporting negativity or scrutinizing the conduct of officials.

The journey of reaching these conclusions has not been as easy as it may seem. In order to do so, this thesis adopts a sociological lens to explore the complexity of news production in China, specifically by engaging with the debates in gatekeeping studies. Gatekeeping is widely used to refer to the process of how raw information turns into news and what journalists do in this process (Shoemaker, 2009). This concept has become more comprehensive in the follow-up studies showing that news selection is not a single decision reached by journalists. Rather, the seemingly "simple decision" made by journalists incorporates various considerations, from journalists themselves, from news organizations, from their audiences, from the political-economy structure of a country, and from a broader cultural system. In this research, I confirm that the forces from these aspects also highly influence the selection, production and dissemination of news in Chinese investigative journalism.

However, I did not strictly follow the way that previous researchers discussed gatekeeping, many of whom adopt it as a level of analysis to explain how news reporting comes into being (Shoemaker and Reese, 2015; Shoemaker and Vos, 2009). Two reasons are discussed throughout this thesis. First, this sociology-grounded

theory of news making is underpinned by western scholarship and experience, which has been established and improved long-term. Starting with Kurt Lewin's (1947) first mention of it to the studies by White (1950) and Breed (1955), scholarship on gatekeeping is tied closely with western culture, and the history of press freedom, as well as social structure (Vos and Russell, 2019). Even though the internet tightens the connection among nations and speeds up the circulation of information globally, the culture, political-economy and social structure in China still preserve its "stubborn" nature and indigenous phenomena are hard to examine in a fixed framework because of its intangibility (O'Brien, 2006). The idea of "boundary-spanning" is urgently required in Chinese social science studies all the time (O'Brien, 2003; 2018).

Second, this research attempts to capture the nuanced changes based on the empirical evidence without downplaying the "Chinese characteristics", which mainly refers to the co-existence of marketization, socialism, populism, polarization etc. (Chen, 2018). The empirical evidence in this research descriptively reveals that the complexity of news production in China is partly based upon the variances among individuals and different news organizations. Here, I do not mean to compare the commercial media with official media, regarding reporting stance, market orientation and target audience. For journalists from the same type of media, variance still appears and matters more than agreement among them, because this industry is full of new blood and has high mobility of journalists. The understanding that only journalists with rich experience can be claimed as investigative journalists are no longer applied in the case of China (Participant 19).

As discussed in Chapter One, Chinese journalism is not a monolithic and unified institution (Zhao, 1998). Although it is widely known that journalism as an institutional sector is attached to the Party-state's governance in China, to what degree is such an observation at the macro level useful in explaining the journalism-related phenomena in China at the micro level. This research began with my fieldwork. Then, I notice that this non-monolithic nature of journalism in China is more plausible when approached at a micro level of analysis, whereas coercive power from political elites is captured at a macro level.

All the journalists in this research reckoned themselves to be investigative journalists, but they shared different views and even contrasting ideas towards today's media landscape in China. For instance, as previously argued in Chapter Six, the journalists had different preferences regarding what news should cover and how they thought about the value of news they covered. On the one hand, this variance among journalists is associated with the individual characteristics of journalists and the market orientation of their particular news organizations; on the other hand, they are caused by the unpredictable turns of online public opinion and the speedy flow of information, which alters journalists' perception of news in every form of contact with the public. It is also unavoidable for journalists immersed an environment with such an overload of information. During the journey of journalists' process of verification, various sources merged and led journalists into different directions to investigate the "truth". Some journalists were still puzzled about why certain news reported after they had finished their investigation (Participants 14, 17 and 25). The

public's online activities, initiated by the prevalence of digital media, join the queue of influential factors in news production, which explains this confusing period that journalists are experiencing.

Therefore, driven by these reasons, I have argued that digital media threatens investigative journalism in China regarding its quality, reporting aims, journalistic perception of newsworthiness, reporting topics, role perception, circulation and so on. Journalists face these threats in the process of gatekeeping, which means processing raw information into a piece of credible, in-depth, accurate and evidence-based reporting. This process is constrained by the economic expectations of news organizations, the tabloidization of the public's news tastes and mis-/dis-information.

8.3 Contributions to Chinese journalism studies and studies of journalism

Although this research is driven by my field experience in Beijing and the empirical evidence I demonstrated throughout the thesis might look descriptive, it does not mean that the findings of this research are parochial and phenomenal. For Chinese journalism studies, on the one hand, this research attempts to seek out alternative approaches exploring investigative journalism in China beyond the "mainstream" academic discourse. On the other hand, this research tries to explain the complexity of news production in China and unpack the social implications of journalists' practices. Situated in a global scenario, this research provides knowledge about journalism in a non-western country and non-democratic context. Moreover, it contemplates the relationship between theory and praxis in journalism studies with reference to the

experience of journalists at a local level, and critically examines how this relationship is established and, more importantly, how we should treat the emerging challenges in academic discussion.

8.3.1 Chinese journalism (studies) in a process of change?

Chinese journalism studies, as an academic discipline, is not always in a state of change as Chinese journalism industry is. This does not mean that Chinese journalism studies has been left behind the practical developments of journalism, but I emphasize that the approaches taken to look at Chinese journalism studies should be updated. I hope my findings in this research can contribute to changing the status of Chinese journalism studies in academia. I have reached this conclusion—Chinese journalism on the change unlike Chinese journalism studies is not—for two reasons.

Firstly, the rapid development of Chinese journalism makes the emerging features of it hard to capture and they are fitted into the theories-based analytical framework in a fragmented manner. As shown by scholars (Pan, 2003; Repnikova, 2017; Tong, 2008), the strategies that journalists have applied to obtain information during their investigations and engagement with officials have an "improvised nature". Tong (2008) frames these practices of investigative journalists in China as "guerrilla tactics" during the time they received tighter controls from the Party. As these irregular practices have developed into regular practices, a new round of controls from the Party, and challenges from technological advancement, impelled journalists to respond, leading to the emergence of new practices. As noted by Berger and Luckmann (1991), institutionalization represents a process about how knowledge

is cast into patterns, becoming routine by repeating certain practices in the long term. Moving to the Chinese context, few repetitive practices were observed in this study because of the intangibility and arbitrary nature of power implementation (O'Brien, 2003). Journalistic reactions have to take this on board.

However, I suggest this statement only fits into the micro level of analysis. At a macro level, such repetitiveness of practices strengthens the centralized power over journalism and it does not allow us to look at other aspects of news production. Although journalists in China struggle with authoritarian controls from the top to down all the time (Repnikova, 2017), studies of Chinese journalism should not be limited to this scope. That is why I suggest research on Chinese journalism is stale, whereas new practices of journalists are emerging. Therefore, this discordance between practices and theories means examining the micro level of practices using a macro level of analysis, which leaves the key stances in Chinese journalism studies unchanged.

Secondly, as explained in the introductory chapter as well, the slow development of Chinese journalism studies is due to a stereotype that Chinese journalism studies is an *area study*, which is characterized by its unique political structure and related social developments. I would not deny my research is an area study, but an area study does not imply its findings should be parochial. As argued by Waisbord (2015), a number of de-westernized studies of media and communication are not really "de-westernized" because they analyse local phenomena within a western framework, which cannot contribute to updating scholarship at an

international level. Research questions and findings of some area studies are still led by the existing scholarship prevalent in western literature, especially literature based on experience from the US and UK (Waisbord, 2015; Lee, 2015). I have mentioned this in this thesis that some works in Chinese journalism studies are based on questionable assumptions. For instance, Lee (2015) wonders why Chinese journalism studies would want to examine "professionalism" as it is a concept that is in decline in western debates. I reflected this point in the introductory chapter and method chapter noting that I had been challenged by some questions from some of my participants about why I referred to some western concepts (e.g. professionalism, fake news, objectivity) to label their indigenous practices.

By comparing my experience with mainstream currents in the literature, I consider that the increasing numbers of published work about Chinese journalism does not reflect the reality of the plurality of thoughts and debates. Most publications are still centred on discussing western-rooted notions, concepts and ideas (Zhou, 2006; Li and Tang, 2012). In Chinese studies, such exploration under existing frameworks relies on "paradigms" (Johnson, 1982), which impels subsequent researchers to investigate what has already appeared in the field. Therefore, as the presence out of the "paradigms" occurs, it is easy to ignore its social and cultural implications and explain the irregularity with alternative frames. Many gaps are waiting to be filled, as what I have argued in this research.

These two points inspired me to carry out this research. It is established on the existing literature and the gaps between theory and practice. At this point, my

research contributes to re-examining how the interplay of theory and practice can help us propose new thoughts and ideas about Chinese journalism studies, but not limited to that. While dealing with the interview data, I noticed that the variance and difference among participants was easily neglected whereas consensus among them always caught the eyes of researchers in their analysis. So, my analysis in Chapters Five, Six and Seven does not mostly confirm what was identified in previous studies, but this does not mean that my findings disagree with the arguments based on a political-economy approach or a cultural approach. My study focuses more on how Chinese journalism operates within a politicalized reality, which I treat as the background of this research in Chapter Two.

Examining the empirical evidence and analysing the relationship between evidence from different disciplines is conducive to improving the inclusivity of the theories we know so far, scholars have suggested (Waisbord, 2015; Waisbord and Mellado, 2014). In order to do this, my research started from field engagement with investigative journalists and then I went back to do an analysis of the literature. Taken together, I argue that the studies of Chinese journalism should place more emphasis on field experience and be open about the new possibilities of news production.

8.3.2 Journalism and its studies in the global context

This thesis has as its point of departure my fieldwork in China, from which I identified the impacts of digital media as the emphasis of my research. I suggest there are three implications of this "area study" in the global context. First of all, this research considers journalism studies should be examined with multiple lenses. On

the one hand, this means borrowing scholarship from different disciplines, which is extremely important for non-western journalism studies, as suggested by O'Brien (2003). On the other hand, it refers to using more than one theoretical approach to analyze the causes and consequences of journalism phenomena. Secondly, this research contributes to understanding the complexity of media systems worldwide. The Chinese media system, as a non-western one, demonstrates its hybridity and inclusivity by emphasizing commercialization, marketization and also authoritarianism simultaneously at a macro level, and variance among journalists at a micro level. Thirdly, this research critically engages with conventional approaches and theories to examine the practices of journalists in a digital age by introducing the debates in gatekeeping. Although I highlighted the digital impact on journalism in China as disruptive, it does not mean that digital media and the public use of it can undermine the legitimacy of journalism, which fits the situation of journalism globally. The empirical evidence in Chapter Five and Six shows that.

8.3.2.1 Journalism and other disciplines

Journalism studies is tightly related to other social scientific disciplines. For example, the notion of gatekeeping proposed by a social psychologist, Kurt Lewin (1947). Although ideas from politics, linguistics, sociology, anthropology are frequently merged in journalism studies, what is suggested from the findings of these types of research is that journalism studies becomes a fragmented discipline rather than a solid one.

While I engaged with the literature about western journalism published in the leading journals in this discipline, I found that journalism in practical meaning, in more and more cases, is shaped as a by-product of other social disciplines and as a technique tool for researching the issues in other social areas. Researchers' emphasis on the digital turn of journalism could simplify journalism studies. As a special issue published in *Digital Journalism* discussed what digital journalism studies is, the central debates scholars developed still focus on democracy, power, audience and technology (Zelizer, 2019; Eldridge et al., 2019). They do not show in what way journalism in the digital age is different from what we have known. The evidence from Haunsch and Vos (2019:337) manifests that this strand of research is more diverse today, but "the trends point to signs of institutionalization". My research suggests that digital presence makes the discussion of journalism in the digital context less theoretical and more descriptive. Journalism, against this digital backdrop, is digitized as an advanced tool to investigate the issues that the public cares about, such as healthcare, financial crises, or political scandals, which makes journalism studies seemingly engaged with other disciplines.

To be specific, as I mentioned in Chapter Six, much scholarship on journalistic verification emphasizes the importance of using different tools online or offline to cross-check facts (Brandtzaeg et al., 2016; Brandtzaeg et al., 2018; Godler and Reich, 2017; Shapiro et al., 2013; Grave, 2016; Wihbey, 2017). Such intensive attention on journalistic verification in recent years not only draws on the prevalence of misinformation and disinformation in social media, but also is based on a "common

sense" knowledge that the legitimacy and authority of journalism rest on their fact-checking activities (Kovach and Rosenstiel, 2014). Hermida (2012) treats journalistic verification as a practice requiring knowledge from different disciplines.

Nevertheless, most studies treat "verification" as a sacred and essential principle to follow (Hermida, 2012; Godler and Reich, 2017). This is because journalists are assumed to be responsible for facts, accuracy and even truth (Zelizer, 2004). Why do we need to do so? In Chapter Four, I answered this question by analyzing the stories from Chinese investigative journalists that journalists' activities were oriented by journalists' perceptions of their relations with other social actors. Digital presence complicates this process that how journalists understand their works and what the public expects to read from their reporting. Verification is significant for journalism and their audience because it reflects the perceptions of journalists on their industry as constructed through interaction, questioning and negotiation with their audience, social media users, organizations and state power. Borrowing the words from Deuze and Witschge to sum up briefly (2020), this digital presence reminds both scholars and practitioners to think about what the future shape of journalism is becoming, compared with what it is today.

Therefore, this is what I mean that tightening the relationship between journalism studies and other disciplines should be supportive in shaping journalism as a solid and firm discipline. Referring to O'Brien's findings when studying Chinese social movements (2003), I suggest that not only Chinese journalism studies needs to adopt the lens of "boundary spinning", but also journalism in worldwide. More

research from other disciplines can help researchers to expand the scope of revisiting journalism studies and glue the presence of journalism in different areas together. This is also what is called for by Waisbord (2015) and Lee (2014), that journalism and communication studies can be upgraded as internationalized studies.

8.3.2.2 Rethinking media systems

The second contribution to journalism studies I attempt to make is to see how media systems are restructured against a digital backdrop. Although the evidence from my research in Beijing is not sufficient to draw a holistic conclusion that the media system is changing, at least this thesis indicates, as I discussed in Chapter Five, that the variances among journalists are micro indications of the macro transition of this industry. In other words, journalists' perception of their job cannot be in an agreement, because of individual variance in personality, experience, background and so on, but I do not treat these variances as personal. They are early indications that investigative journalists in China consider that digital media and the public are becoming a threat to their work.

In Chapter Two, I introduced the complexity of the media system in China based on the diversity of media organizations, platforms, regulations and ownerships. Chadwick (2017) notes in his book that the media system globally is highly hybrid due to the combination and interaction between online and offline media, which strengthens the connection between the public, media and the state. However, as aforementioned in the introduction of this thesis, all conceptualization of journalistic phenomena contains expectations, theoretically or empirically (Zelizer, 2019; de Beer

and Wasserman, 2009). As a media system (Hallin and Mancini, 2004) is a politics-underpinned concept, the political structure of different nations is still an important parameter in understanding and classifying media systems.

According to my findings, I suggest that interpretations of the hybridity of media systems worldwide today should be expanded regarding its breadth and depth. On the one hand, media in non-western countries should establish their own branches of the system and such a system should not rely on categorization dominated by political structures. This is what I mean by improving the breadth of the media system. Research like media ecology (Postman, 2000) and media ecosystem (Anderson, 2016) should be encouraged in non-western countries to expand the notion of media systems. On the other hand, hybridity also can be seen from the nuanced changes among journalistic practices. The same type of journalists (e.g. investigative journalists in this research) could share different and even contrasting views regarding constructing newsworthiness and verifying the facts as "truth". Whilst the topic of media systems is often used with a political economy approach in order to carry out comparative studies between nations (Sparks, 2008; Haunsch and Vos, 2019), the characteristics of media systems at a macro level sometimes are not consistent with the micro characteristics of media practitioners.

8.3.2.3 Global, digital and what's next

Lastly, this research suggests that although journalism globally is faced with unprecedented challenges from the information in digital media, it does not mean this situation is out of control. My research shows that the decline of journalism in China

is not irreversible, and will not necessarily lead to the disappearance of this industry in the future. What has been changed mostly by the digital presence are the attitudes, perceptions and practices of the public, and the public is always an important part of news production (Huang, 2016; Zelizer, 2019).

Thus, here are two reasons for me to suggest that the digital impact is controllable. One is that there are no essential changes regarding how news is produced. News is processed from raw information by journalists, editors or AI, and needs to follow certain procedures. In this sense, journalism is not totally reinvented by improvements in technology. Steensen et al. (2019) express a concern regarding the degree to which journalism in the digital age is different from what we have traditionally known about journalism, and to what extent we should use the scholarship based on the experience of traditional media to examine what occurs today.

Second, a few journalists in this study see the challenges from digital media as an opportunity to show the significance of their work. In China, journalists are licensed to carry out investigation of news events by the government (SAPPRFT), and this licensing system (see Chapter Two) to a certain degree guarantees the status of the journalists in the serious/mainstream media as professional (Participant 2; Chan, Pan and Lee, 2004). For these licensed journalists, providing accurate, in-depth and trustworthy information is the best way to prove the credibility of their reporting as well as their organization. This licensing system may not be widely applicable to journalism in other cultures, but it is true that whether the media are professional or

not has to be measured by the news they provide. Journalists, especially investigative journalists, are responsible for providing quality news based on facts. The journalists not only in this research, but also in the west, do not give up traditional methods of investigation (Larsen, 2017). Information from trustworthy sources in the offline environment is still valued by journalists.

8.4 Limitations

Reviewing the process of carrying out this research, I identified three limitations: the identity of participants, interview questions, and the time span. These limitations mainly derive from methodological disadvantages. Due to the fact that snowball sampling is the major strategy of recruiting participants, the types of media organization participants came from were not concentrated in a particular one, but included websites, newspapers and magazines. Although the participants are all investigative journalists, differences in market orientation can influence news selection (Zhao, 1998). For example, Participant 13 is from an online news website and her reporting mainly focuses on the grassroots. “We hardly write anything about celebrities or public figures, it is more about ordinary people,” she said. Furthermore, four participants suggested they have to write for their print-based publications and news websites as well, but these two different platforms have different targeted audiences, and the ways of processing information have slight differences.

On the basis of the first limitation, interview questions were designed variously according to the different platforms participants came from. As mentioned previously, it is possible that some questions are not covered, or some are asked in

great detail. For instance, in terms of questions about “fake news”, newspaper journalists consider this phenomenon is not likely to occur in their organization, whereas it is more common for website journalists to come across it. Additionally, this research does not look at a particular type of investigative journalism. Participants share diverse specialisms of reporting, covering the environment, politics, education, medicine, law and even breaking news. “I am in the group reporting news about science and technology, but I am quite new here and I don’t have lots of social relationships [where I can source news from]. So, editors will assign me something to do”, as a novice, Participant 5 said. Veteran journalist, Participant 19, told me many cases he conducted about environmental reporting. And when asked if he focused on this area, he said his interests were very broad, with no specific specialist area so far. “Especially when there is a bombshell, everyone will be involved in reporting.” Participant 25 stressed.

Thirdly, there is a confined time period and geographical location. The research result cannot reflect the general status of investigative journalism in China, because of the special time period. From the perspective of geographical location, the research sample can be a representative case for investigative journalists in Beijing, but it cannot be enlarged to apply nationwide. Regional differences in journalistic culture and practice are observable in previous research (Tong, 2010; Liu, 2018), and these differences relate to the provincial political atmosphere and economic developments. So, this research result cannot suggest the general situation of investigative journalism in China.

8.5 Conclusion

This thesis is inspired by my communications with 25 investigative journalists working in Beijing and some media professionals I met in 2017. What has been argued in this thesis is also what impressed me most during the fieldwork. While investigative journalists in China are endangered due to the centralized power of the Party, the digital media is reshuffling the relationship among media, state and the public. At the macro level of analysis, considerable research concludes that this group of journalists have suffered great loss as political control has tightened. What is stressed in this thesis is that the mind-changing and practice-changing of these journalists are driven by the diverse uses of digital media among the public. The disadvantages from this direction can rival the harms brought by political coercion, and in fact are even more powerful in shaping the public understanding of news in the long run. By arguing this, I consider that there are still many gaps in Chinese journalism which can be explored from a non-westernized standpoint. Avoiding framing journalism and media phenomena with a western lens should start with empirical engagement with media professionals. Valuing variance among a journalistic community helps in capturing the nuanced meaning of practices and their relation to existing theories. Referring to Qi (2014:8), “the advancement of theory under any conditions and the framing of new theories must include the development and application of concepts that both better constitute the reality under consideration and explain variations within it”. Thus, this research suggests that as journalism in the world is in a process of change, China is no exception. As western scholars study

digitized forms of communication critically, Chinese journalism should be treated in the same way. The implications brought by digital media to western and non-western societies are more than technological. It complicates the notion of journalism and the way journalists work with the public regarding news production. What is suggested by the current research so far is that journalists have developed ways to maintain their professional production of news (Larsen, 2017; Wang and Sparks, 2020; Cui and Lin, 2015; Anderson, 2016). To conclude this thesis, I refer to what is argued by Zelizer (2019:349). “At a point in time when journalists face threats and intimidations across the globe, original and independent news-gathering should be our most prominent cue for reminding us what any kind of journalism, including digital, needs to be about.”

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Appendices:

Appendix 1 Participant Information Sheet

Introduction of myself:
My name is Nairui Xu 徐乃瑞. I am a PhD student in Lancaster University, majoring in Media and Cultural Studies and I would like to invite you to take part in a research about mainstream media and collective action in China.

Aims of the research:
The aim of this research is to explore the performance of mainstream media in reporting the "group events"（群体性事件）, namely, the "collective action" in China. From a sociological aspect, firstly, if the mainstream media should broaden its function in acknowledging the public by breaking through the role of mouthpiece of the government; secondly, faced with the rapid emerging of alternative Internet-based media, like user generated content (UGC), what are the reasons for mainstream media to claim its professionalism in constructing the social reality? Thirdly, under what circumstance, the journalistic professionalism can be maintained or negotiated? In order to investigate these aspects, an ethnographic study will be carried out in a Chinese mainstream newsroom for 6 months.

To be specific, the conceptual framework sets out from two approaches in the sociology of news production. On the one hand, social control, with regard to the hierarchic layer, sourcing access and the workflow of daily routine, is regarded as a sign of socializing and routinizing the news production. In the context of reporting "group events", conflicting issues receive more constraints in being reported. Scholars point out that Chinese mainstream media has "integrated into the political structure". In this sense, there is evidence showing that the control of reporting "group events" is rigid in the newsroom. So how does the mainstream media perform its social accountability regarding the institutional and organizational control?

On the other hand, the adherence of professionalism and the professional standards in sourcing, selecting and producing news will be taken into accounts in this research as well. The position of mainstream media is claimed by its high authority and credibility. However, immersive impacts from alternative media, the user generated content on social media is decentralizing the status of mainstream media. Added with the gradually professionalized practice of media users, how does the mainstream media maintain or compromise its professionalism, objectivity and balance, is the second concern.

Why have I been invited:
- Xinhua Net, as a mainstream media in China, has a professional team of making news. As a member of Xinhua Net, you must have a good knowledge of news routine and production.
- According to the literature, before 2005, all of the news relating to collective action in

China was made by Xinhua Net and private media organizations had no right in releasing related news. However, the situation changed after 2005.The license of reporting collective action has been distributed to the department of news and public relations in the county level's government.

What will I be asked to do if I take part:

Ethnography is the major research method in this research, which includes observation and participation of the working routine in Xinhua Net. Besides, the semi-structured interview would be conducted during the ethnography. It is noteworthy that the daily activity inside the newsroom would not be interrupted and all the participants are mentioned in anonymity in my written work. All the recordings and written notes are used for myself for research. The digital data would be encrypted and stored by myself. The interviewing questions are listed below:

- Journalists' version:

Q1: What is your job in this newsroom and what is your working routine alike? (According to the answer, do you think your work is highly routinized?)
Q2: Where do you usually get the news, in frontline or through email, phone or online media?
Q3: Do you use online-based tools, like social media to gather the news? If yes, how do you use it? If not, why not?
Q4: Do you think the news gathered from the online environment, such as social media, blog, forum or even the websites of partnership media groups are reliable? (Or what are the differences are the news gathered from these approaches in terms of the credibility and reliability?)
Q5: After you finished drafting a piece of news, are you required to submit to the editors to censor the news content?
Q6: How do you deal with the exceptional news in your work?
Q7: Any disagreement happened in dealing with a piece of news with editors? What is the outcome in the final?
Q8: How do you apply the news sourcing from the officials and how do you consider the credibility of official sources?
Q9: When you deal with the news from different sources, what kinds of information are more likely to be selected to be news? Any other news selection criteria or just based on personal experience?
Q10: How do you think about journalism professionalism (balance and objectivity) in reporting the group events? In what condition, will you compromise the professionalism to what extent?

- Editors' version:

Q1: What is your working routine?
Q2: What kind of software do you use to review the draft news from journalists? What are the advantages or disadvantages of digital software?
Q3: Are the news uploaded or sent to you to review can be released in general? To what extent would you make corrections?
Q4: Do you think the journalists have a good understanding of the newsrooms' aim and stance

in reporting group events?
Q5: According to what, the journalists will be allocated into a specific occupation?
Q6: To what extent do you think the journalists are adhering to professional norms? Or depends on the interference of other forces?
Q7: What is the estimated percentage of the news, which is made by the newsroom originally and what is the estimated percentage of the news on the websites, which is forwarded or reposted from other news organizations? What are the reasons for this constitute?
Q8: Do you have contact with alternative media (independent media or 'we' media) and how?

Do I have to take part:
No, it is voluntary.

What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part:
The interview would take 60-90mins in your spare time after work.

How will we use the information you have shared with us and what will happen to the results of the research study:

- Firstly, all the data will be used for myself and any of the information is possible to be appeared in my PhD dissertation or any related publications.
- Secondly, some of the information mentioned during the interview or what I observed in the working place cloud be used in the conference.
- Thirdly, I would like to share my final research findings and written works with you.
- Lastly, if anything you tell me in the interview (or other data collection method) suggests that you or somebody else might be at risk of harm, I will be obliged to share this information and it is possible for me to delete after negotiation was made.

How my data will be stored:
Your data will be stored in encrypted files (that is no-one other than me, the researcher will be able to access them) and on password-protected computers. I will store hard copies of any data securely in locked cabinets in my office. I will keep data that can identify you separately from non-personal information (e.g. your views on a specific topic).In accordance with University guidelines, I will keep the data securely for a minimum of ten years.

What if I have a question or concern:
If you have further question of participating in this research, you can contact the my via following information：

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Thank you for considering your participation in this project!

Appendix 2 Interview Questions

Demographic information and working routine

1 Could you please introduce yourself firstly? (education and working experience)
2 What is your working routine alike? (period of finishing a piece of news, word length, frequency of news proposal meeting, amount of colleagues in your department, department history, workload, average age of colleagues)
3 What is your news proposal meeting like? What kind of proposal cannot be passed from the editor?
4 Is there any investigative reporting abortion in halfway? Why? How many?

News sources and newsworthiness

5 Where do you obtain the sources?
6 In these sources you mentioned above, how about the percentage distributions?
7 In terms of the Internet, social media account and official account, what do you think of the reliability? How do you make judgment of the reliability of these sources?
8 Have you ever come across any situations where the source you gained from the Internet is overemphasized or totally make-up?
9 What kind of information do you think is worth to be reported among a range of homogenous information?
11 Why do you think news can be news? (Do you think that news can be news is because of the eye-catching characteristic of information itself or the persistence of journalists? If both, any inclinations? And how this happened?)

Professionalism and norms

12 What if 'fact' cannot be verified from different stakeholders? (Namely, you cannot make balance or you failed to make breakthrough of the core news source)
13 In your opinion, what is journalistic professionalism? How do you conduct it in your news reporting?
14 How do you deal with your own attitudes and objectivity in a piece of news?
15 What is the normal procedure for interviewing people? (What is it usually like when you interview different social sectors, including government, enterprise and individual?) Do you feel any changes of interviewing people during these years?
16 Do you have an established stance before you start to interview? What do you think is the relationship between highlighted perspective and fact in the news?

Fake news and "Fanzhuan" news

17 What do you think the fake news is? How do you define that? Have you ever come across any fake news? Do you think who should be blamed? What do you think is the difference between truth and facts?
18 How do you think about "fanzhuan", this phenomenon? Do you think "fanzhuan news" is a type of fake news? Why will this happen?

Interpersonal relationship

19 How about your relationship with your colleagues (journalist and editor)? What do you think about it? (Do you think having a good relationship matters a lot in your work?)

20 Does your editor make changes on your writing often? Why or why not?

21 Do you have any arguments with your editors before making corrections of your reporting? Does the alternate between journalist and editor often?

22 What is the relationship between your department and others inside your news organization? Do you have frequent contact or any collaboration or competition?

23 What is the relationship between your news organization and other peers? (Do you share sources quite often or in what occasion you will share the source or cooperate with others?)

Social responsibility/role

24 What do you think is the most primary responsibility for you to be an investigative journalist?

Influence from new media

25 How do you think about the emergence of new media (Weibo, WeChat), in terms of supplying news sources/ disseminating the information/ influencing your news work? (Advantages and disadvantages)

News Agenda

26 How do you think about the public/government/other media reaction to your news work? (For example, the amount of repost and click/ facilitating policy-making/ generate public discussion/ social impact/ attention from peer media)

27 Do you think the news nowadays is exactly what people like to read?

28 Do you think mainstream media can set the media agenda nowadays? In another word, do you think there is a gap between public news taste and media agenda?

29 Everyone says that the media control is heavy in China, any document-based proof or just personal frontline experience?

Personal feelings of being journalist

30 What do you think is the most important characteristic to be a journalist?

31 How do you think about the relationship between educational background and working experience?

32 Are you satisfied with your job? Any plan for the future? Change the job or do something different?

33 Why do you think people are leaving this industry?

34 How do you think about the media transition? (successful/so-so/unsuccessful/nothing change)

35 What do you think about the future of traditional media?

Appendix 3 Coding Sheet of Newsworthiness

No. of participant	Public power (公权力)	Mass interest (公众利益)	Abnormal (反常/怪)	Immediacy (时效性)	Trending topic/hot topics (热点事件)	Typical in universal (典型性)
1		X		X	X	
2		X				
3	X	X				
4	X	X				
5		X			X	X
6	X	X				
7	X	X				X
8		X		X		
9	X	X				X
10		X	X			X
11	X	X				
12		X				
13		X			X	
14	X	X			X	X
15	X	X				
16	X	X			X	X
17		X			X	X
18	X	X	X			X
19	X	X				X
20	X	X	X		X	
21		X		X		X
22	X	X				X
23		X		X		X
24	X	X			X	X
25	X	X		X	X	
Total	15	25	3	5	9	13